

Temptation and Betrayal

II Samuel 11:1-15; John 6:1-21

The Internet is a wonderful thing. Like an old-fashioned rummage sale you can just about find anything you want. Imagine the excitement in the news last week about an internet company called Ashley Madison. Ashley Madison is a recognised and 'reputable' (really?) married dating company for finding an affair and cheating on your partner. Thousands sign up every day looking for discreet encounters. The strapline for the company, which has a world-wide reach is: Life is short, have an affair.

In case you're tempted, don't be. The news is that Ashley Madison, along with two of its related companies, Established Men, and Cougar Life (a cougar is a sexually predatory older woman) have had their databases hacked into. The site has over 37 million members world wide and there has been a question about how much of their personal detail has been released.

There was no Internet around in the time of King David. He didn't need it. "Lies, adultery and murder. Such is the stuff of this sordid tale from the life of King David. It has often been remarked that the Bible, unlike much of other ancient literature, does not spare its greatest heroes, but subjects them to the same standards of morality and conduct that are applied to others. Impatient Moses; sceptical Sarah; reluctant Jeremiah; cowardly Peter are but a few of the other examples of this remarkable objectivity. But of all the graceless exploits of God's special men and women related in the Bible, none is more repulsive than David's dealings with Bathsheba and Uriah."ⁱ

It's a terrible story. Though secure in his kingdom, there is always the threat of war on the borders of his land. David sends his army to deal with enemies, but he himself was not in the action. He stays behind to initiate another action. Four ominous words: "...David remained in

Jerusalem.” Away from the terror and violence of war, another terror and violence looms. Lying on his couch, David sees what he wants at a distance, a beautiful woman. Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, wife of Uriah the Hittite. She has no existence of her own but is identified by the men to whom she belongs. David knows who she is, and whose she is. He is no pensive, brooding man, but acts swiftly as one who will have his own way. The action is quick. The verbs rush in as the passion of David rushed. He sent; he took; he lay. The royal deed of self-indulgence does not take very long. There is no adornment to the action. The woman returned; she conceived. The action is stark. There is nothing but action. There is no conversation. There is no hint of caring, of action, of love – only lust. He took her. Long ago the prophet Samuel had warned that kings were takers.ⁱⁱ

There’s a fascinating painting of this scene – it’s the one put on to the posters advertising this service. It’s by Artemizia Gentileschi, a rare female Italian Baroque painter from the C17th. It shows Bathsheba bathing, attended by her servants. High up, in the background of the painting, on his balcony, the wizened, Peeping Tom figure of David spies on her. Some scholars have suggested that this might show that Bathsheba, still brutally treated, was not entirely innocent and knowing she would be seen by the King, entrapped him by exposing herself at a time she knew he might be watching. This was the same Bathsheba who later colluded with the prophet Nathan to ensure that her son Solomon would become Israel’s next king. I’m not sure, but whatever the truth of the situation, it is a nasty, brutal, dirty story, no different from many we know of in our own time. What was the strap-line of that website? “Life is short. Have an affair.” Here it is – a story as old as time. And it has consequences. Bathsheba falls pregnant.

Then there is the poor, wronged, husband of Bathsheba: Uriah, a soldier in David’s army. By contrast he is loyal and true and principled. Whilst there is a war on, whilst Israel, the Ark of the Covenant, Jerusalem, and the King are in danger, Uriah will not go home, to comfort, and to intimacy with his wife. David had bargained on Uriah going home to be with his wife, and pass

off any subsequent child as Uriah's, not the bastard of the king. But Uriah remains loyal to his king, and, even after being made drunk by the King (whilst David remains cynically sober), Uriah stays put, to do his duty to King and Country. There is worse to come, for David arranges for Uriah to be killed. To cover up the sin, to distract from the guilt.

When temptation comes into human life, and is followed upon, betrayal takes place. David certainly, Bathsheba possibly if you think she might have been entrapping David though I'm not persuaded of that argument, are involved in an act of betrayal. A relationship is betrayed. In fact two relationships focussing on Uriah: Uriah's marriage is betrayed; Uriah's loyalty to his king is betrayed, to say nothing of the unborn, and unwanted child. When temptation is acted upon, and betrayal takes place, people get hurt. Badly.

I know for some this is a sensitive topic. I mention in the passing that I come from a broken home. 36 years later the effects of that time remain with me. Seeing, hearing, feeling the hurt, the deceit, the indifference, the anger, the denial, the break-up and collapse, and a death, leaves its mark. Watching the ripples of temptation and betrayal spread out from one action, affecting family, friends, and colleagues and on and on.

It happens in all kinds of human relationships. Between couples; between siblings; between parents and children; between colleagues at work. When the temptation to cut corners, satisfy a need, give into a moment's madness, or to be cunning and conniving and perfectly clear about what happens – when any of that is acted upon – people get hurt – and the extent of that hurt, and the depth of that hurt goes further and lasts longer than most people imagine.

Relationships don't always work out. We need to be honest and mature enough about that. There can be few things in life more soul-destroying than being in any kind of relationship that is

not nurturing, warm, or fun. There are times when things need to be brought to an end. It is rarely mutual or pleasant.

People also make mistakes, bad mistakes at times, for which options need to remain open. Forgiveness and trying again is one of them. Whatever the mistake, however bad, forgiveness is a pathway that should rarely be ruled out completely. I have seen the most fractured of relationships, where temptation was about, and betrayal took place, I have seen them heal, with scars, and grow stronger and more resilient. Not always but sometimes. That takes work, and courage, and a bigness of heart and spirit. It only comes about when things are brought into the open, whether it is a personal relationship, or a work relationship. Things may never be the same, should never be the same. When things go badly wrong there are sometimes, though not always, issues on both sides, however the 'blame' proportion lies. Both sides need to work, and be willing to work hard, at making things better, and rebuilding the trust, the confidence and the respect that was shattered.

Sometimes that is possible. And sometimes that is asking too much. It depends on being honest about what has happened, and why it happened, and not everyone is prepared to be that honest, or accept the implications of that honesty.

In this Bible story, from 3,000 years ago, I don't know that David definitely, or Bathsheba possibly, were prepared for that honesty. Uriah wasn't even given a chance. The attempt was to weather the storm of David's actions that resulted in Bathsheba's pregnancy by trying to cover them up, or remove the obstacle (Uriah) that might make things difficult. The monsters of temptation and betrayal were not dealt with, or acknowledged. So things went from bad to worse, and the hero king, now tarnished, could never be viewed in the same way again.

It's an uncomfortable story. It's uncomfortable because it's real, and if we've not experienced it directly we will know of others who've had to deal with the consequences of temptation, and betrayal.

How do you cope? There is no short or easy route to take. It will have to do with being honest; and it may also have to do with recognising that in the midst of the storm of consequences, help is needed, and help may be at hand. In the gospel story, after Jesus had been involved in helping feed the crowd, the disciples were on the sea. It's dark. It's dangerous. They were, literally, out of their depth. Somehow, in the imagery of John's gospel, Jesus came to them through the storm. Jesus in the storm did not come to calm the wind; He came to calm His disciples' terror. He came to be with them in the dark place; in the dangerous place.

If He came towards them, He comes towards us, still. It may be that some of you are dealing with the monsters of temptation and betrayal, or some other thing that these difficult stories have brought to light. Maybe that's the point: these difficult stories bring things to light. They bring them to Jesus Who walks through the storm, over what seems impossible, out of the darkness and the terror and the fear and the denial and the shame and the guilt, towards us. Not to judge, but to help. Not to condemn, but to forgive. Not to leave us in pieces, but to put us back together again. Different; scarred; not the same as before. But alive. Still here. Able to function again. And to move on.

This is no trite answer. This is the toughness of God's love for us in Jesus, whether we're the perpetrator or the victim. Walking towards us through the storms of temptation and betrayal and everything else, to be with us. Good news for us all today.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B, p439

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel, p273