
Tyler Brown

2 Samuel 18:19-33

A Sermon preached in Goodson Chapel, Duke University on October 30 2005

by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

"O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!"

These are among the most poignant words in all of the Christian Scriptures. I want to walk with you for a few moments through the story of David's discovery of the news of his son's death, and begin to trace your grief through the experience of our heritage of faith.

The account I have just read begins with a desperate search for the best way of communicating bad news. How many of you have had to find a way in the last few days of telling someone else some information that had already broken your own heart? Then sheer detail and human complication break into the story – Ahimaaz, son of Zadok the priest, outruns the Cushite. So much complication and detail has been part of the story of Tyler's death, not least that he was so far from his parents and so far from Duke at the time. And what a clumsy form of communication, to send a human runner to the king! How much easier to use a cell phone, we might think. Except I gather Tyler himself was no expert with the cell phone. And some of you will have come to hate the cell phone as the way you heard that Tyler was gone.

King David, meanwhile, is sitting between two gates. I'm sure none of you will ever forget where you were when you heard the terrible news about Tyler, and in time you may come to reflect on the significance of the location. David was between two gates, at the crossroads of his life. And then this ghastly misunderstanding about whether it was good news or bad news. But you have known this confusion, too. Mike was seriously injured. Was this good news, because his life was not in danger, or bad news, because he had been through a nightmare the rest of us can hardly begin to imagine? And likewise for Brian in the hotel. Should one feel guilty about being the one unscathed? The rest of us might say of course not, but would we then be really listening to the horror of this experience for these two young men?

And then Ahimaaz arrives and speaks with the king, but just plain loses his nerve. He can't tell the bad news. He doesn't know what to say. We all dread this situation. The truth is, there isn't a good way to tell bad news. Everyone here today wishes that the events of that taxi ride could have been different. But there's nothing any of us can do. There isn't a nice way to put it. And so we have to face the truth, alone, and together. David has the courage to ask the question which eventually elicits the truth. Absalom is dead. David's world has caved in.

And David is totally and utterly devastated, just as many people here will have been in the last fortnight. He does nothing but repeat the same words over and over again. 'Absalom' he says three times. 'My son' he repeats no less than five times. Absalom my son my son. I find this the most vivid passage in the whole Bible. If you have cried your heart out recently over Tyler, you're in good company. Finally David speaks from the bottom of his broken heart. 'If only I had died instead of you'. This is the powerlessness of grief. No gesture whatsoever, not even laying down one's own life, will make it better. Parents who have constantly put themselves between their son and suffering, siblings who have wanted to be the strong one and said 'let me do that for you': all one's instincts to protect those we love, even at terrible cost to oneself – all those instincts thwarted. 'If only I had died instead of you.' But you can't.

So this is a story like your story – of harrowing loss, of the clumsiness of death and news of death, and of the powerlessness of grief. The question is, why is this story – your story, if I may be permitted to suggest it – why is this story in the Bible? I'm going to offer three reasons which may have a bearing on your grief for Tyler.

On its own the death of Absalom is a desperately sad story. But its being in the Bible means it is not on its own. It is part of a larger story. This is a story in which horrible things do happen, whether by misadventure or by human perversity and sin. But those ghastly things are placed within the broader canvas of the unfolding story

of salvation, in which God's people are commissioned yet find themselves in slavery, are set free and come into a covenant relationship with God and yet still stray from God and are taken into exile, to return only partially, whereupon God comes among them himself in Jesus and blows open the possibilities of their friendship with him by dismantling the power of death, overcoming sin and opening out friendship to people of all races. Thus the death of Absalom, the death of Tyler, is a terrible setback, but is part of a larger victory.

In the context of this larger story, and this is my second suggestion, it becomes possible to tell the truth about the death of Absalom, and the death of Tyler. David was not a perfect king or a saintly man. He spoiled his son Absalom to the point where Absalom knew no boundaries and declared war on his father, dying by consequence. Tyler's death was simpler, yet somehow more agonizing. Tyler died because a man had a lot to drink and got into a car either not realizing, or not caring, that that car was a lethal weapon. We are reluctant to tell the truth because we fear the truth will be so terrible that horror will have the last word. But in the light of the larger story we can find the courage, and the words, to tell the truth. And in the light of the larger story, in which human sin and stupidity are finally transformed by God's sacrificial love, we can slowly, tentatively, begin to align ourselves less with hatred and resentment but with that very same process of transformation. Don't be in too much of a hurry. The deep hurt of Tyler's death will be with you for a very long time. There is no quick fix. But in time you may discover that the healing God has in store for you is in keeping with the way he is redeeming the whole world.

And finally, being in the Bible means the story of Absalom derives its ultimate significance in relation to the definitive story, the story of Christ. Reading of David's grief for Absalom deepens our compassion for God the Father's agony at his Son's death on the cross. And reading Tyler's story in the context of the Christian Scriptures brings us to the question of what Tyler's life showed us about God. And my sense is in Tyler's life his friends and family could discover a lot about God. God is the bringer of joy. So was Tyler. God in Christ lays down his life for his friends. Tyler would do anything for his friends. God in Christ faces a premature death. So did Tyler. You can see these things better than I can, because he tented out with you, went to Banda Aceh with you, played football and baseball with you, shared his life with you.

There can be no greater aspiration for a human life than that it may bring others face to face with God. Tyler's life did that, even though it's perhaps only now that we fully realize it. And that is why, through all our dismay, bewilderment, anger, and sadness, we want to say one thing today above all: 'Thank God for Tyler Brown'.