

15/6/14

GSM

2 Samuel 6:1-15

What has happened since last time: Saul and Jonathan have died in battle and after some argy bargy with Saul's family David has become king. David then conquers Jerusalem which was held by a group of people hostile to him. Now he wants to bring into Jerusalem the ark of the covenant.

[before reading explain what the ark is and what an ephod is using these pictures]



[speak about the use of propaganda/advertising to change people's views or get a particular message across]





try needs you (ritchner)





We are all affected by propaganda. People trying to persuade us what to think and how to behave, whether it's to vote in a certain way, join an army in time of war, to eat more healthily, to give up smoking or whatever it is. It seems to me that we are surrounded by this, whether it's obvious, through billboard advertisements, or more subtle. People want to advance a particular way of thinking and get us to take it on.

We've only read the first bit of this chapter for a reason. When I started preparing this it struck me that the first half of the story really challenges the propaganda we get from the world around us about who God is and what we are permitted to believe as Christians. The more I've thought about it the more I've been struck as to how counter-cultural it is for us and how much it challenges also our attitudes as Christians. It challenges a way of thinking that we hear from the world around us, maybe not on billboard posters, but clearly enough nonetheless, and something we're at risk of accepting as a good way to think.

So let's look at the first half of this passage. It's an odd story and on the face of it a really unfair one. The ark is being taken to Jerusalem on the back of a cart. One of the oxen pulling the cart stumbles and the cart jolts. The ark is in danger of falling off, so the guy nearest it reaches out his hand to stop it from falling off, to stop God's ark from suffering the indignity of falling on the floor. What's the reward of the guy who prevents the ark falling off the cart? Kaboom! He's struck down by God. Killed, for touching the ark, but only because he wanted to stop it falling off the cart.

I don't know what you make of that. It seems unfair, doesn't it? Maybe it reminds you of someone at school who got into trouble with the teacher for no good reason. Maybe a class was misbehaving seriously whilst the teacher was out of the room and throwing stuff everywhere, only for one person to stand up to put an end to it, and to start clearing up the mess, only for the teacher to come back in when only this boy is standing up, and he blames him for the whole mess. It's not fair.

To get to the bottom of this we need to understand something about the ark and God's instructions for it. The ark contained the two stone tablets on which God wrote the 10 commandments. It was a holy item and it represented the presence of God amongst the Israelites. For this reason there were some strict rules, set out earlier in the Old Testament, about how it was to be taken from place to place. It was not to be looked at – it was covered in a cloth – and very definitely it was not to be touched. And these rules said, quite clearly, that the ark was to be carried by the Levites, the priestly clan, from place to place on poles. Not that it could be carried on the back of a cart.



Now you can see how the thought process might have worked. David summoned up all the young men of Israel. They were going to have a party. The ark of the covenant was coming home! This was a big deal. A time for celebration. But, well, look. The ark had a long way

to come, and look how heavy it is. We can't really be expected to carry it all that way. It's going to wear us out and we will only be able to move very slowly. So, look, here's a cart, a new cart, the best we can find. One that's fit for God's ark. We'll make sure that it's absolutely spic and span, that everything's working properly. This will be a fitting setting for God's ark. Now, let's celebrate.

David and his followers would have been aware of the requirements for carrying the ark, or should have been aware of them. Rather than follow them they have a "*this'll do*" mentality. I find the detail that it's a new cart really telling – "we're not going to do things God's way but look, we're making an effort nonetheless, it's not as if we're putting it in a rubbish cart". This smells like David and his men figured that this way was easier and *it would do*.

Think back to those posters I started with. What messages do we receive from the world today? It's very much a *this'll do* approach. There's no need to follow God's law and his commands because it's not what we want to do. If you follow God's law and say that certain things are wrong then you're a fundamentalist bigot. The recent chatter has been about sexual ethics. We are told that we can ignore what God's word says about sexual purity because God is love. God will accept everyone, we are told, so how dare we not accept them? God will forgive, so what right do we have to criticise someone's choices? It's often said with a note of sadness in the voice as if, well, if only we could see how judgmental and cruel we are being. And here's the thing – there is an appeal to the fact that God is love. One aspect of God is emphasised to the exclusion of others. People create an alternative set of rules based on God's love, which has bigotry as the ultimate sin. It's like the Israelites here – the ark is too heavy to carry, but look at this shiny new cart. That'll do instead. They're inventing new rules – as long as the cart is in good shape, we'll be OK.

But the main focus of this for us is not, I would suggest, around how the world and the church disagree about issues of sexual purity. That's just the current issue in the media. Because we take on this *this'll do* approach into our personal lives too. The Israelites decided

not to carry the heavy ark but to look for a new cart instead as a substitute. I wonder what 'new carts' we come up with to avoid having to carry the heavy instructions of God? Around how we deal with our money, or our time, or our lusts, or our selfishness. I wonder how we get ourselves comfortable with doing things that go against God's instructions in his word, because his instructions are inconvenient or slow us down or weigh us down?

What does this lead to? We start to compromise and the more we do it, the easier it gets. Personal holiness is hard work. Taking short cuts is easier and more convenient. We adopt a "this'll do" mentality. We accept the spirit of the age. We still grieve over the things that we do wrong but really only those which hurt others, particularly if we suffer because our relationship with them is impaired. Other things we might do? Sins of the sight or imagination or heart? Not so much. Our greed or lust or anger doesn't hurt anyone if we keep it under wraps. *It'll do*. No-one's perfect. What do you mean Jesus calls us to be perfect? Don't be silly.

What's the result of this? We don't take personal holiness seriously. We no longer resemble Christ but begin to resemble the world around us. We take on the attitude that people mustn't challenge our behaviours or attitudes except on the grounds that the world does. You can challenge me if I'm hurting someone but not if I'm not following God's law in other ways. How dare you? We rely on God being a God of love and refuse to accept Godly rebuke or the challenge of personal holiness. We grow cold. We tire of the gospel – after all, a God that doesn't care about secret sin is a God than can accept everyone without any price needing to be paid. We become linked to a church through a sense of community or obligation, but only that. We feel no sense of urgency to share our faith with others. Eventually, we walk away, but in reality we walked away in our hearts a long time before we walk away from the Sunday morning services.

David and his followers decided to reinterpret God's requirements. They thought they could make do with a cart when God's law required people carrying it. They thought they knew

better than God. In reality what they did was to rewrite God's law. They set up an alternative that was more convenient.

Do we do that? Do we create an alternative, more convenient, unthreatening alternative to God's law?

I'm reminded of the dangers of this when I walk next to the pond in Victoria Park in the winter.



When it gets really cold, a thin layer of ice forms over the edge of the pond. Now and then you can see small birds walking on the ice. They're so light, and their weight is so well distributed through their feet, that they don't break through the ice. The ice remains intact. But if a dog runs on to the ice to retrieve a ball it's been chasing, then – splash – the dog's weight and impact crashes through the thin layer of ice and the dog takes a very cold dip.

If we decide to ignore God's commands in our lives, then what we end up with is a God like those small birds – something that can't break through the ice. It's safe. It keeps things



under control. But it's not God. It's something we have created which is called God. In the Bible that's called an idol, and following that sort of God is called idolatry.

We might think that God's commands are unreasonable. And so they are, praise God. Imagine a God we could reason with! What sort of God would that be? Not one worthy of worship. God's commands come from a God who can't be reasoned with. A God who is beyond our comprehension or reason. They come from a God who is the "Holy One of Israel", the beginning and the end, the great I AM. A God whose purity and glory is such that Moses was not allowed to look at him as he would die. You can see this from how people react when they are in the presence of God in the Old Testament. When Isaiah has a vision of God in the temple in Isaiah 6 he says "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." At Mount Sinai when the Ten Commandments were being given the people of Israel said to Moses "'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.'" At the end of the book of Job, Job says "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." What's happening? God is breaking through the ice. When God reveals himself to his people they see his purity and their impurity and they feel like they're coming apart. The ice is breaking. The weight of God's glory and purity and holiness breaks in and people experience what it is to be impure in front of the pure God. And what they experience is not joy, but woe. Doom. Fear. They feel what David felt in verse 9: "David was afraid of the LORD that day and said, "How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?"".

We worship a holy and pure God. A God that calls us to be holy and pure. This church will be distinctive not when it accepts the *this'll do* mentality of the world around it, but when its actions and words speak of a holy God, set apart, whose work is perfect and all his ways are just. A church that doesn't reinterpret God's word to create something unchallenging and harmless, but a church that upholds God's word individually and collectively.

But how can we do this? We are impure humans and God calls us to be perfect and holy and set apart. We know that we don't measure up. This chapter ends with the ark coming back to Jerusalem and David joyfully celebrating before God. How can we share his joy?

When David and his followers brought the ark on a cart the sin was not of one man but of several men. But only one man was struck down. The ark containing the law fell on one man, not several. One man was punished so that the others might turn from their wrong actions and end up rejoicing before God. Does that remind you of anything? When we decide to compromise with God we create idols to worship. When we follow a "this'll do" mentality we depart from God's instructions and rebel against him. We create a new God, one that won't challenge us. And for that we deserve to be struck down. But there was one on whom the law fell, one who took the punishment that should have been shared. When the ark fell on Uzzah he reached out his hand to steady it. He didn't take the full weight. But when the law fell on Jesus it *crushed* him. When Jesus was on the cross he was being crushed by the weight of the law. The holiness and purity of God was breaking in on him in the way it did on Isaiah and Job and the people of God at Sinai but this time there was no escape, no word of forgiveness or blessing from God. Instead, he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

When the ark came into Jerusalem David rejoiced because it was a sign that God was with the Israelites. Only because the law fell on Jesus can we join David in rejoicing in God being with us.

So where does that leave us? We have been accepted by God if we trust in what Jesus did for us on the cross. What does that mean? It means making Jesus the lord of our lives. It means worshipping God as he is, not as we want him to be. It does not mean that we have licence to continue to go our own way. It's interesting looking at the story this morning – there's an interesting point of detail that it's easy to miss. The first time the ark starts to

travel to Jerusalem it's on a cart. The second time? Look at verse 13 – it's being carried, as it should have been from the start. David and his followers have repented of their fault in not following God's instructions and have done things the right way. Why did he do this? Look at verse 12 – he saw that God's presence brought blessing and he rejoiced.

We follow in the same way. We must confess our sins and repent continually when faced with our rebellion against God and his purity. Christ calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross. Christian life involves a striving. The apostle Paul talks in his letter to the Philippians of pressing on, of straining to take hold of what Christ has won for us. We are to obey and worship God as he is and confess our inability to live up to his standards. We are to turn from our attitudes that would do things differently to God's way. In this morning's passage, David and his followers use a new cart as an alternative to God's ways. Let's work through together in our small groups what our new carts are that we use as an alternative to God's ways. And let us continually repent and confess our sins to God, not out of fear, but out of joy.

There's a striking account of revival coming to Congo in 1953 and to a church meeting in July of that year. One eye witness tells of what happened in this way:-

*A noise as of a mighty rushing wind filled the place.*

*All over the hall, people were down on the ground, crying to God for mercy. Others were shaking violently, apparently uncontrollably. Here and there, a few were on their feet, their hands upraised, their faces radiant, praising God!*

*All over the hall, a shattering conviction of sin was gripping hearts. Sin was suddenly seen as desperately sinful. There were no gradations, big or small – sin was sin, and separated one from God. People were moved to tears, and almost forced by the Spirit of God to confess – confess to petty thieving, jealousies, anger, coldness of heart, spiritual pretence. . . And then, as sin was brought out and laid at the foot of the cross, cleansed by the precious blood of the Saviour, an amazing joy flooded in! Singing started – in great waves – words being made up as they sang, each song praising God for the Blood.*

That's what revival looks like – it's marked by *confession of sin and joy*. Tim Keller says that there are two parts to the gospel – here they are: "I am worse than I could possibly fear but through Jesus I am more accepted than I could possibly hope". When the Spirit came to Congo in power in 1953 it convicted first then brought joy. May it work in our lives in the same way. Joy without conviction and confession is cheap joy.

I want to end with some words from Hebrews 12, which are in many ways a commentary on this passage and instruct us how to behave in the knowledge of our acceptance by God. If you'd like to follow they're on page [*number*] and I'm reading from verse 18:-

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; **19** to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, **20** because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." **21** The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." **22** But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, **23** to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, **24** to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. **25** See to it that you do not refuse him

who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? **26** At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." **27** The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken--that is, created things--so that what cannot be shaken may remain. **28** Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, **29** for our "God is a consuming fire."