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September 5th: 2 Samuel 23 & Ephesians 4:1-16

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The oracle of David. The unity of the Church and the gifts of the ascended Christ.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

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2 Samuel 23. Now these are the last words of David. Like the blessing of Jacob or the words of Moses at the end of the book of Deuteronomy.

They are his last official declaration. The words that he intends to pass down before he departs. Perhaps his final publicly delivered words.

They are not his literal last words however, as he gives final instructions to Solomon on his deathbed in 1 Kings 2 verses 1-9. Along with the psalm of the preceding chapter, the first 7 verses of this chapter constitute the central part of the concluding section of the books of Samuel. But now starting to move back out.

Like the psalm it can be seen as a fulfilment of themes that were first introduced at the beginning of 1 Samuel in the prayer of Hannah. It should be read with the psalm as a summing up of grand themes of David's reign. As a reflection upon its meaning and its significance.

It connects to the psalm in its discussion of the character of the anointed one. The final verse of the psalm concerns David as the anointed and the first verse of the oracle speaks of David as the anointed yet again. The anointed was also an important element of the other great poetic parts of the book of Samuel.

The prayer of Hannah and the lament over Saul and Jonathan. However while the psalm of chapter 22 chiefly concerns the early life of David and his deliverance from the hand of Saul and his enemies. The oracle is spoken in the context of his imminent death and casts its gaze into the future.

Saul and his house were the prominent antagonists in the first half of this concluding section of Samuel in chapters 21 and 22. Now however attention is more focused upon the reign of David and the legacy of his house. Behind this oracle we should see 2 Samuel chapter 7 and the covenant that the Lord made with David and his house.

David delivers his words as an oracle. Such a designation suggests that this is a more explicitly prophetic word not just of David's own composition. Hannah's prayer also has a prophetic character especially in its conclusion.

The main reference to oracles prior to this is found in the book of Numbers in the oracles of Balaam. The form in which David introduces his oracle should remind us of the form of Balaam's oracles. Numbers chapter 24 verses 3-4 reads And in verses 15-16 of that chapter David's reads as follows In contrast to Balaam who is the man who falls down, David is the man who is raised on high.

He is the anointed of God and either the sweet psalmist or the favourite or delight of the songs of Israel, the man that the people love to sing about. Whichever it is, David is a man of song, a man who sings and a man about whom songs are sung. He is a romantic figure, a figure who brings and expresses delight.

After his self-characterisation he introduces the core of the oracle with a statement of how the word of the Lord has come to him for this prophecy. His words are words spoken more directly by the Holy Spirit rather than words like the words of his psalms that are composed by David himself under the inspiration of the Spirit. The content of the oracle itself concerns faithful rule.

To a limited extent it characterises David himself to the extent that he was a wise king and a man after God's own heart. However, having read 2 Samuel to this point, it is clear that David didn't live up to this description. Rather, the description seems to make both a more general statement about a wise ruler and as an oracle should probably be taken as a prophetic anticipation of the Davidic king who would one day exemplify such virtues of rule.

Just rule is rule in the fear of God. This is a recurring theme in the wisdom literature which is the literature of kings. Job 28.28 And he said to man, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.

Psalms 111.10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All those who practice it have a good understanding. Proverbs 1.7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Ecclesiastes 12.13 The end of the matter all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Rule that takes its starting point in such fear of God will be teachable and receptive to the ways of wisdom. It will be attentive to the Lord's instruction concerning good and evil. Such a king will be marked by humility, not having his heart lifted up above his brothers, but ministering to them as the servant of the Lord.

The effect of such a king upon his people is described using imagery from nature. He is like the dawning morning light. He is like the sun on a morning without clouds.

He is also like the rain that gives life and growth to the thirsty earth. The just judgments of the king bring such light to his land, removing the darkness of intrigue and corruption and making things plain. In such a society people have confidence to act, knowing that the ground that they are walking on is not unclear and potentially treacherous.

In the dimness or darkness of societies without such a king, one never truly knows where you stand or where justice lies. Such a king is also like the rain, who blesses his people with what they need to grow. Without just judgments a land becomes parched and does not prosper.

Things wither. However, the judgments of a wise and good king are like rain and dew upon the land. The relationship between the king and his people is like the relationship between the heavens, the sun and the clouds, and the earth beneath.

Similar language is employed in Proverbs 16, verse 15. In the light of a king's face there is life, and his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. The image of the king as the light of the dawn might make us think of the description of Christ's advent as the sunrise in the prophecy of Zechariah the father of John the Baptist and elsewhere in the New Testament.

Christ is the one who brings the light of dawn, and in this light his people have illumination that dispels shadows and darkness and enables them to act with confidence and joy. In the person of Christ we see David's oracle concerning the just king truly realized. In verse 5 David speaks of the relationship in which his house stands to the Lord.

The Lord has blessed him with a sure covenant, one which he himself has established and will fulfill, one that will endure even through the punishment that fell upon David's house following his sin concerning Bathsheba and Uriah. God is not going to cast his promise or David aside, but will bring about all that he has intended for him. Whether they are the conclusion of the oracle or words reflecting further upon its meaning, verses 6-7 contrast the worthless men, the men or the sons of Belial, with the wise and just king.

In contrast to the good king, they are to be destroyed. Like David's blessed house, their end is determined by the Lord. Such men of Belial are difficult to handle, they're like thorns.

To deal with them you need to arm yourself with weapons. There have been several such sons of Belial in the story of the books of Samuel. They are juxtaposed with the righteous king.

Their ultimate fate is to be consumed with fire, according to some translations, fire on the throne. This suggests that the worthless men to which David is referring are wicked rulers. The next section concerns the mighty men of David and some of their heroic exploits.

David was not a solitary hero, but was surrounded by brave and skilled warriors. There are two key groups mentioned, the three and the thirty, two sets of elite warriors. The three are composed of Eleazar and Shammah, and perhaps, depending on how we read it, Joseph Bathshebeth.

Like David himself, these men are mighty men. The exploits of Eleazar and Shammah, which are described, were both achieved against the Philistines. In both cases, their bravery was the means by which the Lord brought about a great victory.

The next group is the thirty. There are at least thirty-three men listed in the group, possibly more depending on how many sons Jason had. We might assume that the thirty

was a set number of men, or a rank, like the twelve in the New Testament, and when members of the group died or retired, someone else would be appointed to take their place.

A story of the thirty's heroics is told, presumably an event that occurred either when David was still on the run from Saul, or possibly very early on in his reign. This is because the Philistines are in control of Bethlehem, which, considering it was so far inside Israel's territory, suggests a level of regional dominance that the Philistines lost very early on in David's reign. The Philistines were controlling David's own hometown, which must have been very distressing for him.

He expressed his desire to drink water from the well by the Bethlehem gate. The point of the request wasn't so much David's thirst as his desire to enjoy the refreshment of gaining control of that which the Philistines had stolen from him and his people. Three of the thirty went and broke through the Philistine lines to get him some water, and brought it back to him so that he could drink it.

Rather than drinking the water that was brought to him by such devotion, David pours out the water before the Lord, devoting the sacrificial dedication of his men to the Lord's service, rather than to his own. The fact that this account is recorded here suggests that it is designed to characterize both the dedication of David's men more generally, along with David's appropriate attitude to their dedication. Abishai, the brother of Joab, and the son of Zehariah, and Ben-Aniah, the son of Jehoiada, are both listed separately.

Abishai's victory over the 300 men is mentioned here, similar to Joseph Bathshebeth's victory over the 800. These victories were almost certainly not in single combat, but were victories achieved by them and the men that they led. Three of Ben-Aniah, the son of Jehoiada's great deeds, are recounted here.

Ben-Aniah became the leader of David's bodyguard, the Cherethites and the Pelethites, and in 1 Kings 2 was placed over the entire army at the beginning of the reign of Solomon, in the place of the wicked Joab. The chapter ends by listing the 30. The presence of the name of Asahel, who was killed while David was still the king of only Judah, suggests that the 30 existed for a significant period of time, and that the members of the group that are listed might span many different periods of its existence, and that some might not have overlapped at all.

The group was most likely formed while David was still an outlaw. El-Hanan was also mentioned a couple of chapters earlier, as one of the men who killed a giant. Apart from Asahel, whose death at the hands of Abner occasioned many problems for David's early reign, perhaps the most important names are those of Eliam and Uriah the Hittite.

Eliam was the father of Bathsheba, as we saw in 2 Samuel 11, verse 3. Here we also discover that Eliam's father, and hence Bathsheba's grandfather, was Ahithophel, who

supported Absalom's coup, perhaps on account of David's treatment of his granddaughter and grandson-in-law. Uriah was Bathsheba's husband. When we consider the heroism and the profound dedication of the 30 to David, the actions of David towards Bathsheba and Uriah are seen to be so much more wicked.

We might also recognise the degree to which David's lust led him to compromise personal bonds of loyalty that had been the backbone of his support. Sin leads men into the profoundest of folly. Concluding the list with Uriah's name is a sobering note to end upon.

A question to consider. How is the good king like the Lord himself? Ephesians chapter 4, verses 1 to 16. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

In the first three chapters of the book of Ephesians, Paul presents the remarkable scope of the gospel. It starts at the dawn of history. It reaches its climax at the end of the age.

It goes from the depths of the grave to the heights of heaven. It overcomes the alienation of man from God and the enmity and division between man and man. It's a great mystery, now revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ and his glorious gospel.

And in chapter 4, Paul speaks more directly about what this means for the life of the Church. He then turns to address Christian practice in the light of the awe-inspiring reality of the gospel that he's declared. We must live a life worthy of such a calling, act in a manner befitting of such a gospel.

The calling isn't just the gospel in some objective sense. It's the fact that we have been made part of this story by God's grace. God has called us.

He has elected us. We find ourselves in the middle of history, at the centre of God's purpose, a plan that has been intended from the beginning of all history. And now it is coming to fruition, in part, through us.

And in response to this, we must be characterised by complete humility, by gentleness,

by patience and by bearing with one another. Humility is a virtue that would not have been seen as such by many within the ancient world. But humility is the only fitting response to the scale of the gift that we have been given.

We're called to gentleness. Gentleness is not prone to wrath. It's not prone to violence.

It's merciful. It's without jealousy. It is without malice and cruelty.

It's kind. In the same way, we're called to patience. Patience requires mastery of your spirit, the ability to endure, to be persevering, to hope.

We bear with each other in love. It's a posture that we take towards each other. It's informed by the previous virtues.

It's gracious. It's not vaunting over others. It believes the best of others.

It's hopeful for others. It's long-suffering with other people. It avoids censoriousness and condemnation.

And all of this is informed with love. We desire the best for each other and we commit ourselves to practical service and care for each other. The focus of this section is on unity.

The source of the unity that we have is the spirit and the shape of that unity is a bond of peace. This bond of peace is held together by the spiritual virtues that Paul has just described. And in speaking of the bond of peace, Paul is suggesting that the way of peace has a power to hold people together.

It is a bond. It's a glue. Paul now lists various facets of the unity of the spirit.

One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. There are three sets here when you break it down and they can be arranged in a Trinitarian manner. The first one, the one body arises from the one spirit who grounds its unity in the one bond that he forms.

The spirit is the down payment and as such is also the one who guarantees the one hope of our calling. The second one is the oneness of the Lord Jesus Christ. That corresponds to the oneness of the faith that has him as its object, an exemplar.

And it's the oneness of the baptism in his name. We are baptised into his name, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, baptised into Christ. And then the third one is the unity of the Father.

The oneness of the Father establishes the unity of all creation under him and as the realm of his presence and his providence. But we can say more. Implicitly, Paul's argument depends upon the oneness of these three.

One God in three persons. The final verse of this section connects the theme of unity with the theme of comprehensiveness that has been prominent throughout the Gospel. God is over all and through all and in all.

And from unity Paul moves to discussion of the diversity of Christ's gifts. Here he gives a rather loose quotation of Psalm 68 verse 18 and shows how it can be related to Christ and his work. You ascended on high leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there.

The Psalm speaks of the Lord's ascension from Mount Sinai to reign, perhaps through the story of the Exodus as he goes up into the land and reigns from Mount Zion. Here it's related to Christ's ascension in triumph. Christ has won the victory and goes up to the throne in power with captives in his train.

He gives gifts as a sign of his enthronement. The same notion that gifts are a proof of enthronement is expressed by Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. Verse 33 of Acts chapter 2. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

To ascend Christ had to first descend to the lower regions. This refers not, I believe, to Sheol but to the earth itself, the earth over against heaven. Christ first descended from heaven and then he ascended.

And in his descent and ascent Christ moves through the entire order of reality, gathering it together in himself, uniting it. Christ is, we might say, Jacob's ladder. He is the conduit uniting heaven and earth.

He is the one that holds everything together. Christ's gifts take the form of ministries to his church. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers.

These ministries are focused upon teaching which instill the principles of true growth. Now elsewhere there are similar statements that are made. For instance in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 4 to 6. In that statement there is a sort of Trinitarian structure again.

The gifts and their variety come from the Spirit. The services and their variety comes from the Lord. And the activities and their variety come from God, the Father.

Here the focus is especially upon the services connected to the unity and the gift of Christ. Apostles, prophets and evangelists primarily minister to the wider church and serve as founding ministries. Shepherds and teachers, meanwhile, are ministers to more specific congregations, guarding and instructing them.

There is some sort of a hierarchy here. A movement down from the head to the body, establishing the sort of hierarchy that renders a body an ordered body. However these

forms of service, while representing the authority of the head, are ministering to and for the sake of the body, so that it might be established, that it might grow and flourish.

And the purpose of these ministries is to equip the saints for their own activity. The whole church is to grow into maturity, not through the ministry of just a few members, but through its united work, through which the gift of Christ in the ministers has equipped it. Growing in such a way will lead to the unity of the faith.

Faith is united. There is one faith. And division is a sign of the church falling short in maturity or failing on account of sin.

Divisions in the church are a sign that something has gone wrong. That doesn't mean that divisions are wrong per se. The unity is not found in the church as it currently exists.

The unity is ultimately situated in Christ. And the more that we are conformed to him, the more that we will know unity. However our lives are much mixed with error, with alien principles of society, and other things that prevent us from arriving at the unity of the faith.

It should lead to the knowledge of the Son of God. He is the one true object of our faith. And the more that we grow in that knowledge, the more that we will find unity with everyone else who is growing in that knowledge.

This leads to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Christ is the standard. We are being conformed to Christ through the ministries of the Spirit that he has given us.

Part of the intent of this is that we might be children no longer. God doesn't want us to be thrown to and fro by false teaching and by deception. We should have the wisdom, the clarity of understanding, the settled will, that enables us to be fixed and determined in our pursuit of the truth, no longer so susceptible to deception.

We speak the truth in love. And these are the two criteria of unity. Unity is found in the truth.

Unlike lies, truth has a unity to it. Truth is one. And the more that our lives are lived under the truth, the more that we will find that we have unity with other people who are living their lives in such a manner.

Love, as well, is another principle of unity. It's an expression of the communion of the Spirit. Any approach to union that does not hold both of these criteria, or any approach that pits one against the other or tries to subdue one to the other, must be rejected.

We need both truth and love. And we will also find, in the final analysis, that these things are one too. If you are not acting in love, then you are not acting in truth.

If you are not acting in truth, you are not acting in love. We must grow into the head, who is Christ. This growth occurs through the united work of the body.

The joints here may be the ministers given to the Church by Christ, with each part being the members of the Church more generally. The ministers given by Christ play critical roles, but every single member must be involved. Paul fuses architectural and organic imagery here.

He speaks of a body being built up. And elsewhere, earlier on, he has used the language of a building being grown. In verses 19-22 of chapter 2. The Church is built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

There is one gift of the Spirit, but there are manifold and diverse gifts of the Spirit. The unity of the Church is found in the one Spirit, but the practical realisation of this unity is found in the representation of the one gift, in the manifold giving of our individual gifts of the Spirit in love. The unity of the Church, then, is not found in the gift that is given directly down, and the Church has no activity relative to it, and it's given to everyone in an undifferentiated manner.

Rather, the unity of the Church is found in the way that God has equipped us to be participants in His giving process. He has given us the Spirit, but He's given us the Spirit in such a way that He has given us the Spirit to give. And so each one of us has a measure of the Spirit that we might minister to others, that we might be means by which God gives to others.

What we have received of the Spirit is not for our own sake alone, it's for the sake of everyone else. This helps us to understand why Paul speaks of the body being built up by itself. The gift comes from Christ, the Ascended Lord, but it comes to us in a way that comes through the gifts of other members of the body.

The unity of the Church requires the manifoldness of the Church. Paul's doctrine of the Church arises out of the Ascension of Christ. The Ascended Christ gives the Spirit by which He forms His body, in which He, as the Head in Heaven, is connected to His people on earth.

As Christ ascends, the Spirit descends, and becomes the means by which Christ fills all things and gathers all things under His rule. It is because Christ has ascended that He can fill all things. A question to consider.

An important theme in this passage is maturity. How might we see the Ascension itself in terms of this theme?