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David becomes king of Judah and Ish-bosheth of Israel. Not judging our brother or causing him to stumble.

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

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Transcript

2 Samuel 2. After this David inquired of the Lord, Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah? And the Lord said to him, Go up. David said, To which shall I go up? And he said, To Hebron. So David went up there and his two wives also, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail the wife of Nabal of Carmel.

And David brought up his men who were with him, every one with his household, and they lived in the towns of Hebron. And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. When they told David, It was the men of Jabesh-Gilead who buried Saul, David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-Gilead and said to them, May you be blessed by the Lord, because you showed this loyalty to Saul your lord and buried him.

Now may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you, and I will do good to you

because you have done this thing. Now therefore let your hands be strong and be valiant, for Saul your lord is dead, and the house of Judah has anointed me king over them. But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim, and he made him king over Gilead and the Asherites and Jezreel and Ephraim and Benjamin and all Israel.

Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months.

Abner the son of Ner and the servants of Ish-bosheth the son of Saul went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon. And Joab the son of Zerariah and the servants of David went out and met them at the pool of Gibeon. And they sat down, the one on the one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool.

And Abner said to Joab, Let the young men arise and compete before us. And Joab said, Let them arise. Then they arose and passed over by number twelve for Benjamin and Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and twelve of the servants of David.

And each caught his opponent by the head and thrust his sword in his opponent's side, so they fell down together. Therefore that place was called Helkath Hazurim, which is at Gibeon. And the battle was very fierce that day, and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David.

And the three sons of Zerariah were there, Joab, Abishai and Asahel. Now Asahel was as swift of foot as a wild gazelle. And Asahel pursued Abner, and as he went he turned neither to the right hand nor to the left from following Abner.

Then Abner looked behind him and said, Is it you, Asahel? And he answered, It is I. Abner said to him, Turn aside to your right hand or to your left, and seize one of the young men and take his spoil. But Asahel would not turn aside from following him. And Abner said again to Asahel, Turn aside from following me.

Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I lift up my face to your brother Joab? But he refused to turn aside. Therefore Abner struck him in the stomach with the butt of his spear, so that the spear came out at his back. And he fell there and died where he was.

And all who came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died stood still. But Joab and Abishai pursued Abner. And as the sun was going down they came to the hill of Amr, which lies before Giha on the way to the wilderness of Gibeon.

And the people of Benjamin gathered themselves together behind Abner and became one group and took their stand on the top of a hill. Then Abner called to Joab, Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that the end will be bitter? How long will it be

before you tell your people to turn from the pursuit of their brothers? And Joab said, As God lives, if you had not spoken, surely the men would not have given up the pursuit of their brothers until the morning. So Joab blew the trumpet and all the men stopped and pursued Israel no more, nor did they fight any more.

And Abner and his men went all that night through the Arabah. They crossed the Jordan and marching the whole morning they came to Mahanaim. Joab returned from the pursuit of Abner.

And when he had gathered all the people together, there were missing from David's servants nineteen men besides Asahel. But the servants of David had struck down of Benjamin three hundred and sixty of Abner's men. And they took up Asahel and buried him in the tomb of his father, which was at Bethlehem.

And Joab and his men marched all night, and the day broke upon them at Hebron. In 2 Samuel chapter 2 David finally becomes king, if at first only the king of Judah. The land is divided between Judah, over which David rules, and Gilead and the rest of Israel, over which Ish-basheth, the son of Saul, rules.

Once again the nation has fractured along familiar fault lines, anticipating the later division of the nation following the death of Solomon. David inquires of the Lord concerning what he should do. This contrasts with Saul's failure to ask the Lord what he ought to do.

The verb go up is important here. David is ascending back into the land. He is ascending to Hebron, and then he is going to ascend to the throne.

David and his men move into the territory of Hebron. Besides being a city of refuge and a sacred city, Hebron was an important site for Abraham and the patriarchs. It was near the first parcel of land possessed in the promised land, as Abraham bought the cave and the field of Machpelah as a burial site.

Later Hebron was the territory given to and conquered by Caleb in Joshua chapter 14. It was a region possessed by giants, the giants that had initially discouraged Israel from entering the land, but which Caleb faced with great courage. Caleb was the representative of Judah among the tribes in the spying out of the land.

He was a principal Judahite. It seems fitting that David would be associated with Caleb in the sight of his first possession in the land. David is a Caleb-like character.

He follows in the footsteps of the courageous and faithful warrior of Judah. Like Caleb, he was a giant killer, and someone exhibiting the same bravery on the basis of God's promise. He has also married the widow of Nabal the Calebite.

Peter Lighthouse observes that David is established as king in three distinct stages. First,

he is anointed as king-designate by Samuel in 1 Samuel chapter 16. He is set apart as a leading warrior at this time through his defeat of Goliath.

Second, he is anointed as king or chief of the house of Judah in this chapter. And finally, he becomes High King of Israel in chapter 5. Lighthouse compares this to the way in which Christ is exalted by stages. He is anointed by the Spirit in his baptism.

He is declared to be the Son of God in power in his resurrection. And he is raised to the right hand of the Father in his ascension. Reading the story of David, we shall see many ways in which he prefigures Christ.

For instance, as one who gains power chiefly through love, David anticipates Christ, who does not just command the external obedience of his people, but reigns in their hearts by his Spirit, fulfilling his law in them by love. David once again shows magnanimity in his treatment of those loyal to Saul. He does not seek to destroy or eye with suspicion the supporters of Saul, such as the men of Jabesh-Gilead.

He recognises and praises the steadfast love and faithfulness that they showed to Saul, and declares that he will do good to them on account of their loyalty. He presents himself not as an opponent to Saul, desiring to wipe out Saul's supporters and dynasty, but as a fitting and generous successor, who admires and rewards the virtues of loyal Israelites, even when those loyalties would not naturally move towards him. Abner, the commander of Saul's army, sets up Ish-bosheth as king.

The suggestion might be that Abner was the true power behind the throne, and as we read on in the story, that seems to have been the case. The establishment of Ish-bosheth as king occurs when Ish-bosheth was 40 years old, and he reigns over Israel for two years. However, David is king over Judah and Hebron for seven years and six months.

How do we reconcile these details? It seems most likely to me that after the loss at the Battle of Gilboa, much of Israel's territory was under Philistine domination again. Ish-bosheth's kingdom was a rump kingdom, established in Mahanaim, in the region of the Transjordan. Outside of Judah, the Promised Land itself was not securely controlled by Israel at this time.

It was not unlikely that it took about five years to establish this rump kingdom to start to re-establish some of what had been lost. This should also give some sense of the bad condition that Israel was in at this point in its history. Abner and Joab, the respective commanders of the armies of the two kingdoms, both meet at Gibeon.

It's an important city of the Gibeonites in the tribal land of Benjamin, presumably within the region of Ish-bosheth's kingdom. We aren't told how conflict between the two kingdoms emerged. Perhaps Abner was seeking to establish Ish-bosheth's kingdom in the city of Gibeon, which was described as a great city like one of the royal cities back in

Joshua chapter 10.

It is about five miles northwest of Jerusalem. Another possibility is that David was making overtures to the Gibeonites. Perhaps he was seeking to persuade them to leave Saul and join him, as we see later on in the book.

In chapter 21, Saul had killed many of the Gibeonites, who should have been protected. So they would be a weak point in the kingdom of Ish-bosheth. Another possibility for David's going out that some have suggested is that David was a vassal of the Philistines at this point, and that that might have been one of his responsibilities to ensure that no other power got established in the surrounding region.

Joab and Abner set up ritual combat, a contest in which a number of chosen warriors were to fight in representative combat. There were 12 on each side. Perhaps the intention was that the Lord would determine the side that would represent all Israel.

It isn't entirely clear what happened, whether there was treachery or breaking of the rules involved, or anything of that kind. However, the contest proved indecisive and the two armies ended up fighting directly, with Abner's forces being beaten by David's men. This symbolic or representative conflict did not give an auspicious sign.

All of the parties died. The three sons of Zeruiah, Joab, Abishai and Asahel, are involved in the fighting. Abishai was already introduced to us back in 1 Samuel chapter 26 as Joab's brother, and the one who accompanied David in his daring escapade in Saul's camp.

Here Joab and Asahel are first presented to us in person in the narrative. Joab will be one of the most important characters in the entire book of 2 Samuel. These are the sons of David's sister, Zeruiah, as we discover in 1 Chronicles chapter 2. Asahel stubbornly pursues Abner, even when Abner tries to discourage him.

It seems that Abner knew that Asahel would overtake him if he continued, but also that Asahel wouldn't stand much of a chance in fighting him. Abner's concern seems to be that he knows Joab is a vicious and vengeful man. If he kills Asahel, the hope of de-escalation of the conflict would be considerably diminished.

What might merely have been a relatively minor skirmish could blow up into something a very great deal bigger. If this became personal for Joab, all of the people could suffer as a result. Asahel does not end his pursuit though, and he is slain by Abner with the presumably sharpened butt end of his spear.

Abner is still pursued by Asahel's two brothers, Joab and Abishai. Abner's men, people of Benjamin, gather around him and he addresses Joab from the top of a hill. Abner wants to ensure that things don't escalate further, and he calls Joab and Abishai to give up their pursuit.

The ritual combat had completely devoured 12 sets of brothers by the sword, a very bad sign of what full blown war would entail for Israel. Abner seeks to prevent this, and manages to persuade Joab to stand down. Both return to where they had come from.

A question to consider. Abner is presented to us as a man alert to the ways that levels of conflict can be increased through the dynamics of vengeance, and attentive to the ways in which even armed conflict can be de-escalated or controlled. This is an example of what peacemaking can actually look like in practice.

What are some other tactics by which conflicts can be more effectively contained or de-escalated when they occur? What are some ways that we can deploy these tactics in our lives and relationships? It is before his own master that he stands or falls, and he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

The one who observes the day observes it in honour of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord, and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lords. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Therefore, let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.

By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.

Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then, let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.

Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what

he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.

Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

In Romans chapter 14, Paul addresses issues of judgment and conscience. Paul might have been speaking to specific issues of concern in the Roman church of which he had heard. However, there is every reason to believe that such issues were common in the churches to which Paul ministered, so it would not be strange to address them at this juncture.

The unity of the church as one body in Christ is a matter of particular concern for Paul. He is especially alert to the way that congregations might divide along particular fault lines between Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, weak and strong, etc. Paul addresses similar issues elsewhere, in places like 1 Corinthians.

Paul begins by instructing them to welcome someone who is weak in faith, who might have scruples about all sorts of issues that a mature Christian would not. In welcoming such a person, however, they should be careful not to get involved in quarrels over adiaphora, things that are neither commanded nor forbidden, issues about which faithful Christians are permitted to differ. Paul gives the example of differences in belief concerning dietary matters, what foods were permitted or forbidden to the Christian in various contexts.

We find examples of some of these differences in the area of idol food in 1 Corinthians. Such questions could be very difficult in situations with different modes of practice coming into collision. Some Jews, for instance, might still be observing kosher requirements.

Some converts from paganism might have very sensitive consciences about the slightest contact with anything that might have any association with idols. The fundamental principle that should apply in such cases is one of welcome without passing divisive judgment. As Paul says in chapter 15 verse 7, Therefore welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Paul is concerned that such matters don't become the cause of alienating judgment or division. There are matters concerning which judgment must occur. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul is adamant that sexual immorality not be tolerated in the church, but that unrepentant offenders be removed from fellowship.

However, on adiaphora, we must recognise that it is not our place to judge our fellow Christians. This refraining from judgment goes in both directions. It isn't just the strong

who must refrain from judging the weak, but also the weak who must refrain from judging the strong.

Judgment is to be left to the Lord, before whom we must all stand on the last day. The Lord is able to make both the weak and the strong brother to stand before him. Paul gives a second example of holding certain days to be holy.

Presumably, Paul chiefly has in mind Jewish Sabbaths and feast days. The important thing is that everyone act in good conscience, properly convinced that they are acting in integrity. Whatever practice is adopted, it is to be adopted in the sight of God, as those who will be judged by him, not primarily in the sight of others, as those involved in judging and being judged by our neighbours.

Christ has died and rose again, in order that he might be Lord of all. Consequently, all of our lives must be lived with reference to him. So often we are preoccupied with how we appear relative to others, in the realm of human judgment.

We constantly judge and are judged, whether or not we are doing so verbally. Paul challenges this entire way of life, calling us to live above all else, in the light of Christ's judgment, and not our neighbours. Recognising that we are all subject to the judgment of God puts all of our attempts at judgment into a very different perspective.

Our judgment seat is petty and premature. Paul's teaching here resonates with that of our Lord in Matthew 7, verses 1-5. When there is the log in your own eye.

You hypocrite. First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. When we are aware that we will have to give account of ourselves before God, we will be much less inclined to judge and condemn others.

We might think here of the experience of being in the same room as a world-renowned expert, when someone makes an obvious error in something related to that expert's field. We will be much more hesitant about speaking up to judge that person, well aware that the expert can see much in us that is no less worthy of judgment. Playing on the verb, Paul says that rather than judging one another, we should rather judge not to put a stumbling block or offence before a brother.

This of course is a far more modest form of judgment, and far better for the health of the people of God. Paul claims that nothing is unclean in itself. The source of uncleanness is the heart, not objects in the world.

He came to this persuasion in the Lord Jesus. Perhaps Paul is suggesting that this is a particular teaching of Jesus which he had received from others. We might here be reminded of Mark 7, verses 18-23.

And he said to them, Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart, but his stomach, and is expelled? Thus he declared all foods clean. And he said, What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. However Paul develops this teaching even further. If someone's heart is wavering in unbelief or uncertainty concerning something, that thing is unclean for that person.

It is the heart that makes the thing unclean, not vice versa. If we act in ways that cause others to stumble, or to go against their consciences, even if something is clean in itself, we are risking great spiritual harm to them by encouraging them to go against their consciences. Perhaps most damning, for the sake of our liberty to eat what we want, we are putting little value upon the spiritual safety of someone that Christ redeemed at the cost of his life.

Paul makes a similar point in 1 Corinthians 8, verses 10-13. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so, by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

Therefore if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. For Paul, this is very much a matter of priorities. Paul hardly ever speaks about the Kingdom of God using that expression, although the reality of the Kingdom pervades his writing.

However, he does so here. The Kingdom of God is about God's saving justice, by which we enjoy good standing with him. It is about peace with God and our neighbour.

It is about rejoicing in the Spirit. Anything that gets placed before this is a problem. Paul fleshes out this point further in verses 19-21.

The work of God in our brother is of so much greater value than is our freedom to partake in whatever we want. As Paul argues elsewhere, we should be prepared to surrender our liberties in such minor matters, for the sake of what really matters and has value. If saving our brother from stumbling involves refraining from eating meat or drinking wine, then so be it.

Paul is concerned that people refrain from judging their neighbour while acting in clear conscience themselves. Our conscience must be clear, not merely in not believing that what we are approving is wrong for us, but also in being clear of causing any harm to our

neighbour. When we act in bad conscience, whether concerning ourselves or in our duty of love to our neighbour, we are engaging in sin.

A question to consider. How do you believe Paul's approach enables us to distinguish between situations where people are genuinely put at risk of stumbling by our behaviour, and situations where people are imposing their scruples upon others as oppressive and illegitimate burdens?