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The coup of Absalom. The appropriate behaviour of Christians.

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

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Transcript

2 Samuel chapter 15. After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him. And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate.

And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, From what city are you? And when he said, Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel, Absalom would say to him, See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you. Then Absalom would say, O that I would judge in the land! Then every man where the dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice. And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand, and take hold of him, and kiss him.

Thus Absalom did to all Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. And at the end of four years Absalom said to the king, Please let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed to the Lord in Hebron.

For your servant vowed a vow, while I lived at Geshur in Aram, saying, If the Lord will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will offer worship to the Lord. The king said to him, Go in peace. So he arose and went to Hebron.

But Absalom sent secret messengers throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then say, Absalom is king at Hebron. With Absalom went two hundred men from Jerusalem who were invited guests. And they went in their innocence and knew nothing.

And while Absalom was offering the sacrifices, he sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counselor, from his city Gilo. And the conspiracy grew strong, and the people with Absalom kept increasing. And a messenger came to David, saying, The hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom.

Then David said to all his servants who were with him at Jerusalem, Arise and let us flee, or else there will be no escape from Absalom. Go quickly, lest he overtake us quickly, and bring down ruin on us, and strike the city with the edge of the sword. And the king's servants said to the king, Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king decides.

So the king went out, and all his household after him. And the king left ten concubines to keep the house. And the king went out, and all the people after him, and they halted at the last house.

And all his servants passed by him, and all the Cherethites, and all the Pelethites, and all the six hundred Gittites who had followed him from Gath passed on before the king. Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, Why do you also go with us? Go back and stay with the king, for you are a foreigner, and also an exile from your home. You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander about with us? Since I go, I know not where.

Go back, and take your brothers with you, and may the lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you. But Ittai answered the king, As the lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king shall be, whether for death or for life, there also will your servant be. And David said to Ittai, Go then, pass on.

So Ittai the Gittite passed on with all his men, and all the little ones who were with him. And all the land wept aloud as all the people passed by. And the king crossed the brook Kidron, and all the people passed on toward the wilderness.

And Abiathar came up, and behold Zadok came also with all the Levites, bearing the ark of the covenant of God. And they set down the ark of God, until the people had all passed out of the city. Then the king said to Zadok, Carry the ark of God back into the city.

If I find favour in the eyes of the lord, he will bring me back, and let me see both Itt and his dwelling place. But if he says, I have no pleasure in you, behold, here I am. Let him do to me what seems good to him.

The king also said to Zadok the priest, Are you not a seer? Go back to the city in peace with your two sons, Ahimeaz your son, and Jonathan the son of Abiathar. See, I will wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me. So Zadok and Abiathar carried the ark of God back to Jerusalem, and they remained there.

But David went up the ascent of the mount of olives, weeping as he went, barefoot and with his head covered. And all the people who were with him covered their heads, and they went up, weeping as they went. And it was told David, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.

And David said, O lord, please turn the council of Ahithophel into foolishness. While David was coming to the summit, where God was worshipped, behold, Hushai the archite came to meet him with his coat torn and dirt on his head. David said to him, If you go on with me, you will be a burden to me.

But if you return to the city and say to Absalom, I will be your servant, O king, as I have been your father's servant in time past, so now I will be your servant, then you will defeat for me the council of Ahithophel. Are not Zadok and Abiathar the priests with you there? So whatever you hear from the king's house, tell it to Zadok and Abiathar the priests. Behold, their two sons are with them there, Ahimeaz, Zadok's son, and Jonathan, Abiathar's son.

And by them you shall send to me everything you hear. So Hushai, David's friend, came into the city, just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem. Ever since David's sin with Bathsheba, his power within the kingdom had been crumbling.

His moral authority was deeply compromised, his wisdom was failing him, people like Joab were gaining power in his administration, and there was violence and wickedness within his own house that he could not deal with. Now, in chapter 15, after his ineffectual attempts to deal with him, Absalom the crown prince stages a coup against his father. James Jordan suggests that Absalom functions as a foil for Solomon.

Both Solomon, whose name means peace, and Absalom, whose name means my father is peace, have peace as part of their name. Solomon is distinguished for his wisdom, Absalom for his cunning. Much as the two descendants of Saul, Ish-basheth and Mephibosheth, had names that played upon that same word for shame, so the two sons of David are set in juxtaposition with each other, with their names both having to do with peace.

Absalom might also remind us of David himself in various ways. His physical appearance

is similar to that of David. He's beautiful, he is arrestingly handsome, and he steals the heart of the people.

David was also noteworthy for his beautiful physical appearance, and over the period of chapters 16 to 18 of 1 Samuel, won over the hearts of the people, as Absalom does here. Absalom seduces the bride away from David the husband. Absalom begins his coup by developing a sort of retinue around him, a group of runners and servants that made him look like a king.

More particularly, Absalom takes on the characteristics of a king of the nations. We don't usually read of David travelling around with a chariot and horses. Absalom quite likely picked this up from his grandfather in Geshur, when he stayed with him in Aram as a result of his exile.

Judgment was delivered in the gate of the city, and it seems that Absalom focuses upon people from the northern tribes, the tribes of those tribes that were formerly associated with Saul. There is a natural split within the nation, and when the nation is in a poor condition, it's along this fracture line that it will tend to divide. Saul had very much privileged the tribe and people of Benjamin during his time in rule, and Absalom suggests that David is showing a similar sort of favouritism to Judah.

People from Judah get heard by the king, but those from Israel aren't really cared for by the king. They don't get justice in Jerusalem, and so any people coming down to Jerusalem from Israel to have their cases heard is discouraged before they are ever seen by David or one of his ministers. Absalom, however, plays the part of the flatterer.

He shows great concern for their case, and wishes that they could be heard. If only he were king, he would act on their behalf. In all of this, he's fostering grievances among the people in the northern part of the kingdom against David, suggesting that he does not care for them or administer justice truly.

He's also, by his flattery, winning hearts and minds to his cause. As he acts this way over a period of years, it puts him in a position to stage a coup. We should again be alert to the way that David's sin with Bathsheba set off a chain of events that weakened his hold, weakened his administration, empowered unfaithful elements within it, and weakened loyalties in others, and compromised David's capacity for judgment and for moral authority.

In the preceding chapters, we saw David's indecision, and how his inability to act in the case of Tamar and Amnon, and in the case of Absalom, gave power to others to force actions upon him, or to act in his place. Here, the absence of a strong just authority leads to a power vacuum that will be filled by people like Joab and Absalom, and Absalom is all too happy to exploit the weaknesses of David's kingdom at this point. At the end of either four or forty years, Absalom addresses the king.

If it is forty, forty seems to be the original reading, then it might be a reference to the years of David's reign. David reigns for forty years, so Absalom's coup might occur in the final year of his reign. If it's four years, which would be the easier reading, Absalom has had a considerable amount of time to strengthen and create grievances, and is now in a strong position to actually pull off his coup.

There are similarities to be noted here, with the vengeance that he enacted against Amnon back in chapter thirteen. He stages a special feast, invites many royal officials, and then performs the deed. This is all after many years of cunningly biding his time, two years in the case of Amnon, and likely four years here.

He goes down to Hebron, to the south, under the pretense of holding a peace offering, a feast in fulfillment of a vow given for deliverance. He invites two hundred top men from David's administration. They will either join him, or they will serve as helpful hostages.

At this point, Absalom has David in a pincer movement. Israel to the north have had their hearts estranged from David, and will join Absalom, and to the south there is Hebron, and for all David knows, the two hundred men have thrown their lot in with Absalom. He has to flee to the east, out into the wilderness.

Absalom and his men are based in Hebron, in the south of Judah, where David's rule over Judah first began. Ahithophel most significantly joins Absalom. He is Bathsheba's grandfather, and perhaps even though Bathsheba has now married David, Ahithophel is angry with David on account of his taking of his granddaughter, and his killing his grandson-in-law.

David and his men leave Jerusalem, and he leaves ten concubines to guard the palace. While they would not physically guard the place, they would be a remnant of David's house left there. David is accompanied by the Cherethites and the Pelethites, the bodyguard of the king, also with six hundred men from Gath, either Gittites who had joined him during his period there, or the original military force that had been with him from the beginning.

Ittai is a convert from Philistia, a Gittite, who has associated himself with David. The vow of loyalty that Ittai gives to David at this point is reminiscent of the vow that David's great-grandmother, Ruth, gave to Naomi back in the book of Ruth. David and his men cross the brook Kidron, which is between Mount Zion and the Mount of Olives, and Zadok comes bringing the Ark of the Covenant, also Abiathar.

These are two men functioning as high priests at the time, and the Ark is going to go with the true king. Yet the Ark belongs back in the city, and David here goes into exile, while sending the Ark back to the city. The description of setting down the Ark until all the people have passed by might remind us of the entry into the land back in the book of Joshua, as they crossed the Jordan.

This is a sort of inverse of that. They are now leaving the land. David goes up the ascent of Olives, the Mount of Olives, in a state of mourning with his men.

They're weeping, and with bare feet. He hears that Ahithophel is among the conspirators, and he prays that Ahithophel's counsel would be made into foolishness. There is an immediate answer to David's prayer, as Hushai the Archite arrives to join him.

Hushai, the king's friend and counsellor, will be a means by which Ahithophel's counsel can be thwarted. He will go back to the city, present himself as loyal to Absalom, and seek to undermine the counsel of Ahithophel. There will be a number of men who are faithful to David left in the city.

The priests, Zadok and Abiathar, and their two sons, and Hushai, the king's friend and counsellor, will all be there to act for David and spy on Absalom. A question to consider, in what ways does David's retreat from Jerusalem anticipate the story of Christ and his cross? Colossians chapter 3, verses 12 to 25. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body, and be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Bond-servants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people please, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ, for the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

In Colossians chapter 3, Paul has been talking about the ways that we should regard ourselves in the light of our participation in Christ, and how we should put off the old self, condemning to death those aspects of ourselves that are earthly. Now in the second half of the chapter he turns his attention more fully to the alternative patterns of life that we must adopt, patterns of life that are characteristic of the new self. These are the new garments, as it were, with which we must clothe ourselves.

As God's chosen people we must be marked and distinguished by particular graces. Speaking of Gentile Christians as God's chosen people is to refer to them in ways

previously reserved for Israel. In place of the vices that Paul has mentioned earlier as things to be put off, we must positively clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance and forgiveness.

These are the sorts of behaviours that would have been perceived as weak and servile by the surrounding Greco-Roman culture, lacking in honour, spiritedness, power, dominance and generally unmanly. A real man stands up for his honour, avenges himself, he's proud and tough and effectively asserts his dominance. While the Christian faith still has a substantive account of masculinity, which can also require defence from challenges of a rather different kind in the contemporary context, it is imperative that we appreciate how much of a revolutionary departure from cultural norms the vision of virtue in the teaching of Paul actually was, and that we resist the calls to return to such pagan norms, especially in the context of masculinity, that we hear from various quarters.

Such traits of meekness, forbearance and forgiveness will distinguish us as people of Christ, making us stand out from the people who are around us. Paul's teaching here concerning forgiveness recalls that of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 verses 14-15. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. For Paul, love is the quintessential Christian virtue. It's the virtue that holds everything together.

It runs throughout the whole. Love is the white light that is refracted into the various virtues that he speaks of here and elsewhere. Elsewhere, when Paul speaks of love, he speaks of it as the fulfilment of the law.

In Romans 13 verses 8-10, Owe no one anything except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and any other commandment are summed up in this word, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbour.

Therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. In Jesus' teaching also, love to God and one's neighbour summarises and unites the entirety of the commandments. Once you understand the centrality of love, the unity of everything else becomes apparent.

Love is also that in which everything else reaches its glorious height. In 1 Corinthians 13 verse 13, So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love. Love is also that without which everything else is vain or empty.

1 Corinthians 13 verses 1-3, If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not

love, I am a noisy gong, or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

The peace of Christ should rule in the hearts of His people. Paul makes a similar point back in Philippians chapter 4 verse 7, And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. If the Colossians are to avoid the wrath, the envy, the malice, and the anger that drives most people, they need peace to reign in their hearts.

When others around us are stirred up by anger, resentment, antagonisms, fear, anxiety, and all these other things, how do we know the calm that enables us to think clearly and act wisely? It's God's peace that guards our hearts and minds in situations of conflict. On occasions when there is conflict without, if this peace reigns within, our hearts and minds will be protected from being caught up in it. We will be able to think and act with wisdom and grace when others are losing their composure, their wits, or their clarity of mind.

We were called to such peace as one body. The peace isn't just to be internal to us as individuals, but characteristic of Christian community more generally, enabling us to exist at peace with each other as one body, rather than as a fractious set of warring factions. The peace of Christ is a mark of his rule.

It's a mark of his assuaging the fears and subduing the passions and the antagonisms that assail us. The peace of Christ is the result of his conquest of our rebellious spirits, his stilling of the boisterous waves of our souls. And when such peace reigns within us, it should be expressed in the giving of thanks.

Paul calls for the word of Christ to dwell in us richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in our hearts to God. Paul's teaching at this juncture follows the pattern that we see in Ephesians chapter 5 verses 18 following, where he moves from teaching about the word of Christ dwelling in us to teaching a code of behavior for the Christian household. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In both of these places Paul talks about the indwelling of Christ as something manifested and realized in the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. In scripture the word of God is often given to us from outside. When we read the word of the law it comes to us first and foremost as words from outside of us that we hear.

However, we are supposed to take the word of God into us to make the word of God part

of us through memorization and also through song. Singing the psalms is a way in which the word of God becomes part of us. It conscripts our emotions, it arises from within us, it is something that appeals to the loves, the desires, the affections, and it calls us forth in delight and love for God's truth.

In the singing of psalms the word of God becomes richly part of us. They are not just words that we are sent to outside of ourselves, they are expressed in the first person. They are an expression of the heart that has been warmed by the truth of God and now declares that truth with transformed affections.

The word of God having been hidden in our hearts by memorization and meditation and now springing forth in delightful song and worship. Everything that we do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus under his authority and for his glory and we give thanks to God the Father through him as creatures of God's handiwork and as tokens of his redemption. Everything that we have and are is a gift that we have received from God's hand and the purpose of our lives should be a rendering back of ourselves in word and in action to God in thanks.

From this Paul turns to the behavior that should characterize the Christian household. The Christian household in the relationship between husband and wife, between parents and their children, and between servants and their masters. Paul's teaching on these matters is not just a knee-jerk conservatism, a desire for social conformity and respectability from Christians that will avoid them becoming scandalous in their society.

No, the practices that he advocates are related back to the Lord. Wives are to submit to their husbands as is fitting in the Lord. This submission is a form of behavior that is appropriate to the new realm of life into which we have been brought by God's in Christ.

The relationship between husbands and wives is not a symmetrical one. Wives are instructed to relate to their husbands in a way that differs from the way that husbands are instructed to relate to their wives. This is the same in other parts of the New Testament, both in the teaching of Paul and in the teaching of Peter.

However, it should be noted that Paul does not say husbands you have authority over your wives and wives you must submit to that authority. Paul's teaching is not founded upon a male prerogative. Rather, both husbands and wives are instructed to give priority to consideration of the other and their well-being.

The asymmetry is important though. In Paul's teaching elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 11.3 and Ephesians 5.23, he speaks about the man as the head of his wife. As such, the man should be given a special honor.

The nature of headship is not primarily seen in the face-to-face relationship between the husband and the wife, but more particularly in the way that the husband leads the way

out into the world. The husband stands for his wife and family in the wider society, and he is particularly responsible for setting the tone and maintaining the foundations and boundaries of his household. As his wife submits to him, she is not acting as a doormat, but rather making this task joyful and pleasant for him.

One in which the weight of the responsibility that he bears is not experienced as one subjecting him to constant blame, but rather as one that honors him with a particular and important task. His wife acting as his counselor and encourager and supporter, not his constant critic. For his part, he is called to love his wife, especially seen in not being harsh with her.

He has to be gentle, kind, meek, forgiving, and forbearing with his wife. His position in the family is not one that is given to him for self-aggrandizement, but rather for the building up of the entire household in a way that glorifies God. This is particularly important when he is raising his kids.

A father who is overbearing, a father who tries to dominate his household, can be a great cause of frustration and discouragement for his children. The Christian father, by contrast, should be one that encourages and builds up his children. He must use his own strength in a way that builds up the weaker people around him, in a way that enables them to rise to their own full stature.

Rather than provoking his children, he should be kind and gentle, encouraging them in their growth by his careful instruction. Many Christians would find themselves in a position of slavery. Slavery was a common position for people in the ancient world, and it could feel alienating as if they had no agency whatsoever.

But even for the bond servant, there is a way in which they can find dignity in their labours. They can work as to the Lord, not just for the eyes of their masters and for what they see, but for what the Lord, their true master, sees. In recognising that their true master is the Lord, and not primarily their earthly master, the mindset that they take to their labours can be one governed by the dignity that they find in work that is ordered towards the approval of Christ.

From him they will receive not meagre payment, but a rich inheritance, one belonging to the sons of God. Knowing the justice of their true master, they can also act with patience and fortitude in situations of oppression. They know that the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong that he has done.

Oppressive earthly slave owners will one day be judged by the Lord, whereas those who have faithfully sought the Lord's approval will be rewarded. A question to consider, how, looking at Paul's teaching concerning the proper behaviour of Christians, can we see that Christ is absolutely integral and indispensable to the entirety of it?