

Age & Youth

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

What are the youth of today up to? They don't seem to respect our ways, they don't seem to think our values are important... We've probably heard this complaint in different variations multiple times over the years... we've probably also said something like that that.

Well, if you have, you're not alone. Here's a few more quotes about the youth of the day:

"The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers."

Or

"I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words. When I was a boy, we were taught to be discrete and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly wise and impatient of restraint."

Or even

"Our earth is degenerate in these latter days; there are signs that the world is speedily coming to an end; bribery and corruption are common; children no longer obey their parents; every man wants to write a book, and the end of the world is evidently approaching."

Do these complaints sound familiar? In case you're wondering, the first quote was from Socrates in the 5th Century BCE, the second by Hesiod around 816BCE and the last was found on an Assyrian tablet written around 2800BCE. People have been complaining about what the young people are up to for the whole of human history!

I suspect David had more reasons than most to complain about the behaviour of his sons, though to put the blame on Absalom would be missing the point. The whole issue started back in chapter 13 where another of David's sons rapes Absalom's sister, Tamar, and David does nothing. We read:

When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn.

Absalom goes on to kill his brother Amnon because of his actions. We no longer have to imagine what it would be like to be in this family. Although the dynamic is somewhat different to today, in that in Ancient Near Eastern cultures it was acceptable to marry a sister, we have heard stories of abuse in families and the subsequent turning of a blind eye to the behaviour for a whole range of reasons.

How would you feel if that was happening in your family of origin? "Angry" probably does not even begin to describe it. When we hear the context of today's story, we understand what motivated Absalom to take the actions he did and the civil war that ensued.

Of course, it would not have happened had there not been support from within the people of Israel. There must have been some discontent with the way that David was ruling in order for there to be sufficient support to have an insurrection, and for at least a while it did look as if it might succeed. The threat to David's life and crown were real.

Perhaps at the point of today's reading, we see David getting insight into behaviours. We see him torn between being a king and being a father. As a king he should want his adversary dead, preferably with some tortuous punishment. As a father, he wants his son.

David has lost several sons by this point. This, of course, would have been a relatively common occurrence in his day, but the pain still strikes deeply. If we read on, we would hear of how David all but abandoned ruling his country in order to grieve his son. He has to be called back to his duty to the people.

This is not a story about a young man wanting to steal his father's power. It is a story of a young man who sees that the old ways are

no longer working and something new and different is needed to allow the community to move forward. And so, at the end, when he is defeated and the house of David is once again secured, David grieves his son and all that he has lost in this conflict. Perhaps also David comes to a realisation of how he has contributed to what has happened with his son. Had he responded better to Tamar's rape then the story would have taken a very different path. The young man may or may not have gone about solving the problem the right way, but he at least tried unlike his father.

So perhaps it is worth wondering what we can learn from the young people in our lives. Traditionally it is the other way around. However, if we are going to keep growing, both as individuals and as a community, we need to embrace the lessons from all generations and not just our own. Tradition is important, but it cannot be at the expense of communicating God's love to new generations in ways that have meaning to their culture.

So as we reflect on what this means for us as individuals and as a community, I wonder what lessons you have learnt from the younger generations. What changes might we need to make in what we do in order to enable young people to hear about God's love in a way that makes sense in their culture?