

Through this season of Advent we will follow a theme arising from the first reading each week. In those readings we hear today of David; next week Jerusalem, the city of David, is centre-stage; and then on Gaudete Sunday we meet the same place under its alternative name – Zion; and finally, in the fourth week, the prophet speaks of Bethlehem, the other 'city of David', the place of his birth. So as we prepare for the celebration of the birth of David's son, together we will reflect on the great king, the first king of the united Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the places most associated with him. We will look at the biblical record, and also the places today, which I visited as part of my Sabbatical in the middle of the year.

In our first reading Jeremiah, in optimistic mood, looked forward to a virtuous branch which would grow for David as God had promised.

Who was David whose dynasty lasted over four hundred years? Is it fitting that the long-awaited Messiah should be a descendant of David?

We all know that David, the ruddy complexioned shepherd boy, killed the giant Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, bringing him down with his trusty sling and a smooth stone. David had protected his father's sheep from attacks by lions and bears, so a Human Tank was no problem, especially when David had the One God of Israel on his side.

However, we read in 2Samuel, 21,19 that "*Elkanah, son of Jair, a Bethlehemite, killed Goliath of Gath, the span of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.*" As with everything about David, the situation is more complex than popular belief allows.

David was a great and fearless military leader. He fought against and he also fought for the Philistines. The story is carefully told so as to protect David from any suggestion that he fought against his own people. Rather, he used his position to aid and support the folk of Judah, while fighting their enemies. But there is no escaping the fact that he was not only an outlaw, and leader of a motley band of misfits, but he went over to the other side and joined the army of the Philistines.

David succeeds Saul as king of Israel, after a number of convenient assassinations which take out rivals, leaving David as prime candidate. He is always able to say 'It was nothing to do with me, my hands are clean', as he mourns the deceased who now no longer stand in his way. He demands his former wife, Michal, be returned to him, leaving her husband bereft but powerless [see 2Sam. 3,14-16]. She is his claim to legitimacy for she is a daughter of Saul. Although she did once love him, she came to despise him. He spurns her and, we are told, she would have no children. David will not give her the fulfilment of child-bearing, for any child would be a grand child of Saul and so a threat.

If you are getting the idea that David was a clever, calculating manipulator, who got his own way, and did not mind whose body he stepped over to get there, provided nothing could be stuck on him, then read his final instructions to Solomon who was named as his successor. It sounds like the *padrino*, a *mafioso capo* giving a hit list to his consiliere. It is a long list of those who are to be taken out. David's final words, "*Let not his grey head go unbloodied to Sheol.*" [1Kgs 2,9]

David, having consolidated his grip on the crowns of Judah and Israel, uniting the twelve tribes, enriches the Kingdom with military successes. He is at the peak of his power when his life falls apart. "It is the time of year when kings go to war" (2Sam. 11,1). But this king stays home and enjoys long lunches and long siesta while his troops are in the field. Walking on his terrace in the cool of the evening he sees a beautiful woman bathing. Learning that she is the wife of one of his elite soldiers, does not deter him. He summons her to his chamber. The only words we hear from Bathsheba are, "I am pregnant". David tries to cover up his crime and when he fails, Uriah is a noble soldier of the king, Uriah is sent back to the front line carrying the orders which are his death certificate. Many of David's troops die to cover up the murder of Uriah.

Nathan the prophet asks for David's opinion in a case where a rich landowner entertains a guest by feeding him a beloved lamb snatched from the arms of a poor man. "*That man deserves to die,*" declared Judge David. "You are that man", retorts the prophet. [2Sam.12,5].

David's son and heir, Amnon, rapes his half sister, Tamar and David does nothing. Absalom murders Amnon in revenge, Tamar is his full sister. After a time in exile Absalom returns and leads a rebellion against his father. Had he taken the best advice he would have been successful. He fails and is killed, against the express orders of David, who tearfully laments his beloved child. "*Would that I had died in stead of you.*" [2Sam.19,1]

The last we see of David he is old, powerless, impotent – he needs a beautiful maiden as a human bed-warmer; his interest in her goes no further. And he is manipulated by those close to him to ensure Solomon's succession. It is a brilliantly told meditation on old age, and its consequences.

The story of David is a tale of hero and anti-hero, epic and tragedy, success and failure. What we cannot doubt is David is one of us. He has star qualities, everybody loves David, and major flaws – we are never told that David loves anyone. His actions suggest his great love is himself. His words are carefully chosen but his first words give the clue: When he hears Goliath's challenge he wants to know - "What's in it for me?"

David is brave, and strong, a mighty warrior, with a poet's ability to give the right expression to his words, look at his lament over Saul and Jonathan; he is described as a musician, he has sensitivity, and the Psalms are attributed to him. Perhaps that is his saving grace. Although he is deeply flawed as a human being, the psalms speak of someone who, despite the vicissitudes of life, has complete trust in God to uphold him and rescue him, even from the snares of death.

Jesus, son of David, read the Scriptures, and perhaps especially in the Psalms, he saw himself, his mission and his ministry. David, the poet, more than David the warrior, makes him a worthy ancestor to his redeeming descendant.