

Archbishop Rowan Williams: 'Take the time to look inside ourselves'

Commenting on 1 Samuel 17: 38-50 and Romans 12: 9-21 at Wellesley House School, Archbishop Rowan Williams spoke on the story of David and Goliath where David is given the armour of King Saul and finds it more of a hindrance than a help.



Some people are inclined to think that the Bible is rather short of humour. Most people don't pick up the Bible if they're looking for a good laugh. But those who know it perhaps a bit better may be able to point you to the bits that really are rather funny, and we had one of them in the first lesson this evening. It's the picture of David, the shepherd-boy, getting ready to go out and fight Goliath. The King offers him his own armour. Now, if you're going out to fight a nine-foot giant, heavily armed and in a very bad temper, you might be quite grateful to have some extra protection. The problem is that we've already been told in the Bible, some chapters before, that King Saul is one of the biggest men in Israel, and David's about fifteen and doesn't sound terribly robust. So we have this wonderful picture of the King loading David down with armour that doesn't fit him, with a helmet that comes right down over his eyes and a breast-plate that hangs down to his knees. And David, it says, "tried to walk and failed".

So that's the picture: somebody who wants to protect themselves, but, when they try to, they actually can't move. They can't do a thing. Quite apart from all the other interesting lessons we learn from the story of David and Goliath (like what is the best way to deal with a nine-foot giant in a bad temper?) that particular detail is really worth thinking about. Sometimes we spend so much energy trying to keep ourselves safe that we can't actually do anything - we can't actually move. We're so concerned with fencing ourselves around, defending ourselves from any risks and any problems, that we end up not really 'living' at all. We've bolted all the doors, we've shuttered all the windows, and we are like David with a helmet coming down to his nose, with a breast-plate coming down to his knees. We can't

do a thing.

But what's the alternative? We all want to be secure. We'd like to be safe; we don't like taking risks. But the answer is not to load ourselves down with lots of things that actually have the effect of stopping us living. We don't deal with the problem by piling up things so madly, so obsessively, that we're surrounded with stuff and we can't move. We need to find another way of reacting when there's a big challenge coming, when things are difficult, when we've got to find new ways of living.

So what does David do? The Bible tells us that what he did was what he knew he was good at. He wasn't much good at fighting in overgrown suits of armour, but he was quite good with stones and slings; with a little bronze-age catapult. That turned out to be what he needed. He thought about what he was good at; he thought about the skills God had given him. Not what God had given somebody else – God had given King Saul the great grace, no doubt, of being enormous and strong and fierce and the sort of bloke who could walk around in armour like that – but he'd given David some different gifts. David thought 'well, the only way I can really deal with this challenge - this problem, or crisis - is by remembering what God's given me, what I'm gifted with, what I'm good at.'

That's the perhaps the second thing to think about from that story. How are we going to manage when things are difficult, when there are challenges and crises we'd never imagined – when things are harder, more surprising, more stretching than we'd ever expected? Part of the answer is 'look at yourself'. What am I good at, what are the gifts I've been given, what is it that makes me me? Because God has given me special things, very different 'special things' from my neighbour, but the things that will actually help me when life is tough and the challenges and crises are fresh and difficult.

That means that if we're going to cope with the challenges and the crises of our lives (and they keep coming even when you're nine, ten, eleven, fifty, sixty-two, seventy-five or whatever) you actually need to know yourself. What am I really like, what am I good at, what do I love, what do I hope for? And it's really very important, as we grow up, to spend some time getting to know ourselves. We spend time with each other, getting to know one another as friends; we spend time exploring what other people are like. But sometimes we need to spend just as much time – maybe even more time – getting to know ourselves, looking inwards, thinking 'what am I really like, what really matters to me, and what are the gifts and the strengths that I actually have?' Because having faith in God is really a matter of being confident that God has given me, somewhere in myself, the resources I need to respond to a new problem, a new situation. And to do it, like David, with a bit of courage and a bit of imagination.

So, we get to know ourselves. We spend a bit of time being quiet enough with ourselves to look inside. And there's really no alternative to this – to grow up and to know yourself you do need a bit of time in peace and quiet. Never forget to build that in whatever you're doing, the time and space to look at yourself and discover what matters to you and what are the gifts that you've got.

But the last thing to bear in mind in all this is that sometimes it's rather hard work getting to know ourselves. And sometimes when we do look at ourselves, we don't like what we see very much. We look at ourselves and think, 'that's not really very impressive; it's not as impressive as the person next to me. Maybe I ought to be better; maybe I really ought not to know this at all; maybe I ought to blot out what I know about myself and just barge on regardless.' So really to know ourselves, and to

know not only what we're good at but what we're bad at as well, to know our weaknesses, our temptations which is part of it as well – we need quiet and space for that. But more than anything else, we need to know that somebody loves us so deeply that even the weaknesses we see in ourselves don't matter – something can be done with them too.

And that's where God comes in. God, who tells us that He loves us so much, He can even do things with our weaknesses. Of course God can do things with our strengths, that's obvious, but one of the things the Bible tells us too is that God can do things with our weaknesses. That often it's when we admit we're not brilliant at everything, that we can't do absolutely everything, when we admit that we need help from one another – that's the moment when, mysteriously, God is able to help us do more than we could ever imagine.

Getting to know ourselves isn't just a matter of knowing our strengths, it's also knowing what we need – what we need from each other, what we need from our friends and our families. In the second lesson tonight, we heard St Paul talking about the importance of living at peace with one another, giving and receiving with one another in the family of God and being able to go to someone else and ask for help. So that bizarre picture that we started with, of David loaded down with somebody else's armour, that's a key to some of the things we might need as we move and grow and develop as human beings and as Christians, or whatever faith we profess. We learn, first of all, that it's no good pretending. It's no good borrowing somebody else's armour and defending ourselves so successfully that we can't move. We need to look inside. We need, like David, to remember what we're good at and to trust that God has given us the skills we need to face a crisis and a challenge and to keep going when life is difficult. As we learn to know ourselves, and to look inside in moments of peace and quiet, we need also to recognise that we're not good at everything and we're always going to need each other, to help each other along. And that it's at that moment – when we admit we can't do everything – that, mysteriously, is when God comes in and makes a big difference.

Because the secret is: God doesn't ask each one of us for one hundred per cent success in everything all the time. (I hope the Headmaster will forgive me for saying that!) But God does ask us for one hundred percent honesty, not for succeeding all the time but for being open to the truth and admitting who we are, what we're like, what we're good at, what we're bad at, what we need from each other and what we can give to each other. So much in the New Testament is about that pattern of being honest – honest about what we have to give, honest about what we need from each other – and the whole thing made possible by belief in a God who does not give up on us when we admit our failures.

Jesus, in his ministry in the Gospels, is always coming across people who are willing to say to him 'this is what I need'. That's where real wisdom, real grown-up-ness, always begins – not 'I can succeed at everything, I can do anything', but 'this is what I need'. When we're honest about that, well, then miracles really do happen. I think that what we ought to be praying is that we're delivered from the temptation to load ourselves down with stuff, with protections and securities, to such an extent that we can never move out, never reach out a hand to make a friend. Never, like David, simply bend down at the side of the brook and pick up those little stones that are going to give him the victory.

Look inside. Let's give ourselves the time to look at ourselves. And let's remember in that quiet time how God looks at us with love and patience and hope – the God who looks at us when we try to be honest and truthful, and works with our honesty and with our weakness as well as our strength, to

make us grow up to be more and more like Him and like His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Archbishop Rowan Williams