

Light or Thorns?

November 24, 2024

2 Samuel 23:1-7

John 18:33-37

The authors and editors of Second Samuel have labeled this poem “The Last Words of David.” Ralph W. Klein has noted that this is the first of *ten* passages one might call “the last words of David.” There’s a part of me wondering if David kept talking in the hope that so many last words meant he’d never die... Well, no.

Among David’s talents in life was poet and songwriter. Seventy-three of the 150 psalms are credited to him, and the Books of Samuel contain other songs remembered as his work. If I were a monarch and a songwriter – I guess I claim one, but not both, of those titles – if I were both, I would be very pleased to write a song like these words in 2 Samuel to summarize the nature of my life as a king.

The God of Israel has spoken;
the Rock of Israel has said to me:
“One who rules over people justly,
ruling in the fear of God,
is like the light of morning,
like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,
gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.”
Is not my house like this with God?
For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,
ordered in all things and secure.

If I were David, that’s how I’d like to be remembered.

As Kathryn M. Schifferdecker writes at Working Preacher, “The light of morning, especially after a good rain — that’s what a God-fearing king is like. In the semi-arid land that is Israel, rain is a very precious resource. A good, soaking rain during the night, and then the sun rising to bring forth grass and grain and fruit from the earth — these are priceless gifts of God. And so is a good, just king, one who rules in the fear of the Lord. Both enable life to flourish.”

If you’re struggling to imagine this, think of what rain brings in Kona rather than Hilo, and it will make more sense.

“Is not my house like this with God?” David asked, rhetorically, I’m sure. But it’s a question that has a complicated answer. David lived for many years as an armed rebel opposed to the

established government. In order to support himself and his army he became a mercenary, and contracted with the nation's enemies. After the death of King Saul and most of his heirs, David used military force to subdue other claimants and gain the crown. David committed rape against Bathsheba and murder against her husband Uriah. David's apparent failure to hear the complaints of the citizens primed the rebellion of his son Absalom. In their next book, 1 Kings, the authors of 2 Samuel described yet another attempt by one of David's sons to usurp the throne.

In writing these "Last Words of David," he was wearing rose-colored glasses that I'd describe as more rose than glass. Valerie Bridgman writes at Working Preacher, "As a former hospice chaplain, I know that when people come to the end of life, their memories often soften to 'clean up' the messiness of their lives."

In this poem, he cleaned up the past, for sure. As he "cleaned up," he managed to tell the truth. The characteristics of a good ruler, a proper leader, are as he described. They seek to bring justice to their people. They start with what we would think as structures to define liberties and responsibilities, that seek to prevent people from being injured by others, or being so heavily burdened that they lapse into poverty. The laws you'll find in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy provided that framework. Among the obligations you'll find there is to make sure that widows, orphans, and foreigners had access to food, and that they were not denied shelter.

Beyond structural justice comes the resolution of disputes, both those we call crimes and those we call civil complaints. Some of those – probably most of those – would have been resolved within the villages or the family groups without ever coming to the King. Respected adults in the clan or a council of elders would have resolved the questions of disputed property lines, who owned the stray goat that turned up in somebody's herd, and what should be done about the fight between those two guys. It was the more difficult cases that went to the monarch, who had to discern truth that others were not able to.

Ah, truth. Another essential characteristic of just leadership. One mentioned by none other than Jesus himself. Cheryl Lindsay writes at UCC.org, "Jesus prioritizes truth to such a degree that he frames his life's ministry, from incarnation to this moment and beyond, to his act of testifying to the truth. Truth is so important to Jesus that he told the Samaritan woman at the well that the test of worship is the measure of spirit and truth. Above all, therefore, the good news is centered, anchored, and rooted in truth. This is our test; let it be our testimony. Testify to the truth."

We might, with Pontius Pilate, mutter, "What is truth?" at this point and leave the room. Jesus didn't answer Pilate's questions at any point thereafter.

I think we can do better than Pontius Pilate.

In the Last Words of David, we have the truth about leadership, power, and authority. It is founded in justice. Further, it stands upon accountability. That's what it means to rule "in the fear of God." David the King, when he was doing well, realized that he needed the support of his officials and his people. He took care to listen to their concerns. Several of the stories about David are not about how resolute he was, but how willing he was to change his mind when someone brought him new information. If you're going to be rigid as a leader, then you'd better be right every time, and who does that? If you won't learn as a leader, frankly, what good are you?

David's capacity to change his mind was one of his best qualities.

David described himself in this poem as "the oracle of God," that is, one empowered to speak on God's behalf. That doesn't sound particularly humble, and it wasn't. He called himself the man God exalted – again, not humble. He called himself the anointed of the God of Jacob, and if you were wondering if he'd found humility yet, no.

All these titles, however exalted, did reveal another truth. It was God who spoke. It was God who exalted. It was God who anointed. David might have been king, but God made him so.

He was accountable to the people and to those around him. Most of all, he was accountable to God.

His greatest successes took place when he remembered God's authority over his. His greatest failures took place when he believed he had more authority than God.

Rulers who acknowledge no accountability to others are not like the light of the morning shining upon grassy meadows drinking in the night's rain. No, they are like the weeds and thorns that nobody wants to touch because they injure you. They are like the things cut and gathered and burned because there's nothing more to be done with them.

Good leadership brings light. Poor leadership brings thorns.

Those are the standards for us to use in evaluating our leaders. Do their stated policies promise light, or do they promise thorns? What experience do we have of them? Did their leadership shine, or did it cut and pierce? Did they strengthen structures of justice or did they dismantle them? Did they make decisions based on fact and fairness? Did they tell the truth? Did they acknowledge accountability to others? Did they claim to be more than they were?

Light? Or thorns?

These are also the standards to use in evaluating our own leadership. Have we illuminated? Have we encouraged? Have we assisted the people on the margins? Have we been humble before God? Have we told the truth? Have we diligently worked to understand the truth?

Light? Or thorns?

Pilate never learned the truth from Jesus. He crowned him with thorns, not light. Three or four years after sending Jesus to the cross Pontius Pilate was ordered back to Rome to explain why he had executed a group of Samaritans. We don't know what happened with that. The Emperor died before Pilate reached Rome, and no record survives.

Thorns. Not light.

Jesus went to the cross wearing thorns, and rose from the grave to enlighten the world. Jesus did not reach for the temporal power of a Pilate or a David or an Emperor Tiberius. He simply told the truth.

Let this be our leadership, and let this be our leaders: Tellers of truth. Builders of justice. Wise and discerning souls. Open to learn. Accountable to those they lead and to God.

Light. Not thorns.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson