"<u>SACRIFICE</u>"
2 Samuel 24

Not that I'm counting down or anything, but this will be the last communion service I lead here at Wade Street Church. When I was thinking about that, I wondered what I'd preached about at the very first one that I led here, so I rifled back through the files and discovered that the first time I was involved in a communion service here was the occasion when I came to "preach with a view", as they call it – giving the congregation a chance to hear the prospective minister and discern whether it was worth taking him on. That was on the 20th May 1990 and, as I recall, the congregation was fairly small – around 35, maybe – and they were sitting in the wooden pews long before this sanctuary was extended and refurbished. That morning we looked at an episode in the Old Testament from the life of King David, Israel's greatest king, and I thought it might be worth revisiting that today. Of the very few people here today who were there on that first Sunday I don't imagine any of you will remember it, but if you do, it won't hurt to hear it again, I'm sure.

For the Jewish people, David is obviously one of the central characters of their faith – their most famous King, the symbol of their political heritage, the man who had the vision for the great Temple in Jerusalem. For those of us who today who call ourselves Christians, he is one of the ancestors of Jesus and the author of many of the Psalms which still form the basis of much of our worship. And for those with no faith at all, he is the hero of the story of David and Goliath, so beloved of football commentators at this time of year as non-league clubs are drawn against Premiership opposition in the FA Cup.

For us, his story is packed full of detail and meaning, from the very first mention of him in *1 Samuel 16* to his final speech to Solomon in *1 Kings2*. We read of his difficulties with Saul, his inspirational friendship with Jonathan, his growing popularity with the people, his amazing generosity to Saul's family. The first ten chapters of *2 Samuel* are full of instances of God's blessings to David, and then, in *2 Samuel 11 & 12* we have the story of his adultery with Bathsheba and his complicity in the death of her husband, Uriah. Even the great men of God fall down on occasions, as we have seen in the last couple of years with such people as Ravi Zacharias and Bill Hybels. From that point on, things seem to go downhill for David and we read in the rest of *2 Samuel* of the rebellion of Absalom and the many problems which dogged David in his later life.

David's story takes up one and a half books of the Old Testament and is so full of adventure and powerful texts that it is difficult to know where to turn, but this morning we're going to focus our thoughts on one episode at the end of the great King's life, the story that we have just heard from *2 Samuel 24*. David had built up his empire and it was experiencing a measure of peace and stability after many years of internal turmoil and foreign difficulties. For some reason, though, David decides to count up all his *"fighting men"*. It's difficult to know exactly why this happened – the author writes that *"the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them"*, which is a bit mysterious – but somewhere along the line, it seems that pride and a desire to trust in his own resources rather than relying on God's provision were involved. Even Joab, the supreme commander of David's army, advises against such a course of action, but *"the King's word overruled Joab and the army commanders"* (*v4*).

Once this military census was complete, David realised his mistake and we read in *v10* that *"he was conscience-stricken … and he said to the LORD, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done'"*. So God gives him a choice of punishments – all of which seem to involve punishing other people as well and raise some pretty serious questions which we're not going to deal with this morning – and David chooses what seems to be the least painful of the three evils. Even so, the effect is pretty bad and David goes over to the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite to try and make a sacrifice which he hopes will appease God and bring an end to the plague.

Well, Araunah is there – doing a bit of threshing, no doubt – when who should arrive but the King of Israel and a number of his men. It's obviously a great honour for Araunah and he starts bowing and scraping, asking what he can do for the King, and, in *vv22,23*, offering to give David the threshing floor, free of

charge, and throwing in the oxen and wood for good measure. *"O King,"* he says, *"Araunah gives all this to the King."* What I'd like us to focus on this morning, though, is David's reply in *v24 – "I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing"*. Let's reflect on what that might have to say to us today.

Sacrifice is something that seems inextricably bound up with being a Christian, as we recognise this morning in our communion service. We are able to call ourselves Christians, disciples, followers of Jesus because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross at Calvary. Without his sacrifice we are nothing and we have no hope for our lives here on earth nor for our eternal destiny. But Jesus also calls ***us*** to a life of sacrifice – not in order to become any more acceptable to God, but as a grateful response to what he has already done for us. Jesus himself, in *Luke 9:23*, says to his listeners, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me"*. And Paul, in *Romans 12:1*, writes, *"In view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to him"*. We, like King David, are called to make sacrifices as part of our response to God. They may be sacrifices in terms of money, in terms of time, of status, of relationships or whatever, but there are three things about those sacrifices that we need to note from David's words, and they depend on where we put the stress as we read *v24*.

1. <u>I WILL NOT SACRIFICE TO *GOD* THAT WHICH COSTS ME NOTHING</u>

We need to know why it is that we are making the sacrifice. For many of us, maybe, just the fact that we are making some kind of sacrifice is enough: our Christian faith, as we've already hinted, provides us with some sort of ethic of sacrifice, whereby we're always making sacrifices, right, left and centre because it's what's expected of us as a Christian. We make sacrifices or our family – moving house to get the kids into a better school, working long hours so that we can provide them with all kinds of material benefits, that kind of thing. We make sacrifices for our jobs, working away from home, maybe, or putting up with poor conditions of employment, doing lots of extra bits and pieces for no extra pay, because that's what's expected of a Christian. We make sacrifices for our church – involving ourselves in all kinds of activities and attending meeting after meeting so that it looks as if we're really keen and eager, despite the fact that it might not be doing a great deal to advance the Kingdom of God. David could have done all that – he could have made all kinds of gestures to make it seem as if he was making a great sacrifice – but what God wanted was a sacrifice for himself. David was making his sacrifice to **God**, he was demonstrating his dependence on and his submission to the God who had done so much for him.

God is not interested in empty gestures of what **we** think will please him. He wants us to be totally submissive to him and open to his will. That means we must sacrifice that which is probably most dear to us – our own ideas of what we think God wants. God wants our openness to him, he wants us to respond to him, the Father who gave up his own Son, part of his own very self, as a sacrifice for us on Calvary. And you consider your own position before God, take some time to pray and ask God what he wants you to do with your life: ask him if you are really doing the things he wants you to do. Yes, you may have been doing something for years – when you started it was a real sacrifice for God, but now it is an irrelevance as far as God is concerned and it is taking up time, energy and resources that could well be put to better use for him.

2. <u>I WILL NOT SACRIFICE TO GOD THAT WHICH COSTS ME *NOTHING*</u>

David's sacrifice was costly: it meant a recognition that he had done wrong, an admission of failure. It meant going along to the farm of one of his subjects and lowering himself in that way. It meant buying the threshing floor, the oxen and the wood. He could have avoided all that by sending a note to the priests and asking them to make a sacrifice on his behalf – so much easier, so much less embarrassing, but no real sacrifice for David himself.

For a sacrifice to be a true sacrifice, it must cost us something – in terms of effort, in terms of prestige, in terms of material resources and so on. If we are to do what God truly wants of us, it may well be painful, it may well be costly – but if it's not, it's not really a sacrifice. So often – particularly at this time of year,

we come up with all kinds of good intentions, but when it comes to the crunch, we don't carry through. "A new year – perhaps I'll start going to a prayer meeting or join a house group" – but after a few weeks it gets a bit inconvenient to miss our evening meal, so we give up. Jesus, of course, speaks of prayer ***and fasting***, so maybe that's w ay round it! (Of course, we've even turned that on its head today and if we want people to turn out for a prayer meeting we have to offer them a breakfast or croissant and coffee.) Maybe we resolve to give a little bit more in our regular offering to God, but then we miss the magazine we've had to give up or the extra pint or whatever and the giving goes down again. So often we give up before we've done anything worthwhile for God. Remember those words of Paul we quoted just now from *Romans 12 – "Offer your bodies to be a living sacrifice"*. Someone once said that *"The only trouble with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling off the altar"*.

God wants us to make our sacrifices count. Jesus didn't get down off the cross after an hour or so and say, "Well, that should have done it. And it was getting a bit painful up there anyway." He carried it through and it cost him everything. If we are to live as God wants us to, then our sacrifice may well be costly.

3. I WILL NOT SACRIFICE TO GOD THAT WHICH COSTS *ME* NOTHING

As we've already said, David could have just asked the priests to make the sacrifice for him, but that would not have cost him anything, really. And nor would have been a personal sacrifice. David was the one who had sinned. It was his sin that had caused so much trouble for so many people, so he was the one who needed to make amends. The sacrifice had to cost ***him*** something. We've talked about the costliness of sacrifice, how it needs to be something that really means something. But the cost of it must be borne by you – no-one else can make that sacrifice for you. After all, we are responding, above all, to what Jesus did on the cross – and there he died for ***you***, to free ***you*** from the influence and consequences of sin.

Often, when we think we're making a sacrifice, it's not personal at all. You give up your time to do something at church: you enjoy it, it costs you very little, really – but it's your partner and kids at home who are really making the sacrifice, they're the ones who are missing out. We talk piously of all that the church does in terms of prayer, of outreach, or giving – but you're not involved personally, it's no sacrifice for you. Back in the 1980s, when Billy Graham came to London, we used to brag about how many people were on the buses going to Mission '89, but when it came to asking members of the fellowship how many people they personally brought along, it was a different story. It's easy to hide behind the "We" – that was one of the big debates when many of the prayers of the Church had the "I" changed to "We". We can all make sacrifices that cost other people, that involve them, but don't mean anything as far as we're concerned.

The death of Jesus was effective because ***he*** died on Calvary, the sinless Son of God: no-one else could have done that, no-one else could have taken on himself what was needed to free you, however "holy" they might have been. And no-one else can respond to God on your behalf, no-one else can make your sacrifices for you.

As, once again this morning, you meditate on the sacrifice Jesus made for you as you take this bread and wine, have a good hard pray and take a good look at what you're doing for God. You don't have to give ***UP*** everything ***FOR*** God, but you do have to give ***OVER*** everything ***TO*** God, so that he can use you and your gifts in the way he wants. Remember why you're doing it, for whom you're doing it – for God. Remember that it needs to cost you something – that's not easy, but being a follower of Jesus was never advertised as an easy option. Remember that it's you who need to act – Jesus died for you, and he expects you to respond.

For reflection and discussion

1) Why do you think David was wrong to count his fighting men? Does it have any lesson for us?

2) How can we keep reminding ourselves of God's goodness to us and not lose sight of why we are making sacrifices?

3) How can we ensure that other people are not having to make sacrifices on our behalf?

4) "You don't have to give ***UP*** everything ***FOR*** God, but you do have to give ***OVER*** everything ***TO*** God." What do you understand by that? What might it mean for you in practice?