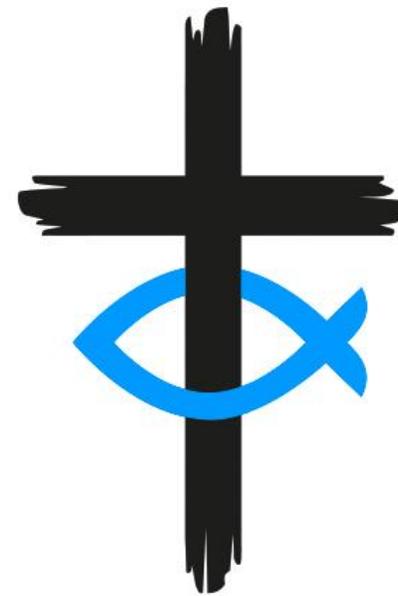


# Daily Devotions from the URC

Saul, David & Solomon  
David's Reign (2)

18<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> November 2018



## Introduction

We look at David's reign, the growing tensions in his family and the death of his son, Absalom.

*Andy Braunston*

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Young Absalom also had a memorial stone, a pillar which he set for himself because he: said "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance". But his father did not forget, and his name is kept in remembrance to this day because of his father's heart-rending grief. "My Son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you, Absalom my son."

This is a time for us to remember that the Father grieves still for us. He keeps our names in remembrance because of the Son who died for us. Reflect; and do this, in remembrance of Him. Lest we forget.

Prayer

May the power of your love, Lord Christ,  
fiery and sweet as honey,  
so absorb our hearts as to withdraw them from all that is under heaven.  
Grant that we may be ready to die for love of your love,  
as you died for love of our love. Amen

*St Francis of Assisi*

While David was sitting between the inner and outer gates, the watchman went up to the roof of the gateway by the wall. As he looked out, he saw a man running alone. The watchman called out to the king and reported it. The king said, "If he is alone, he must have good news." And the runner came closer and closer. Then the watchman saw another runner, and he called down to the gatekeeper, "Look, another man running alone!" The king said, "He must be bringing good news, too." The watchman said, "It seems to me that the first one runs like Ahimaaz son of Zadok." "He's a good man," the king said. "He comes with good news." Then Ahimaaz called out to the king, "All is well!" He bowed down before the king with his face to the ground and said, "Praise be to the Lord your God! He has delivered up those who lifted their hands against my lord the king." The king asked, "Is the young man Absalom safe?" Ahimaaz answered, "I saw great confusion just as Joab was about to send the king's servant and me, your servant, but I don't know what it was."

The king said, "Stand aside and wait here." So he stepped aside and stood there. Then the Cushite arrived and said, "My lord the king, hear the good news! The Lord has vindicated you today by delivering you from the hand of all who rose up against you." The king asked the Cushite, "Is the young man Absalom safe?" The Cushite replied, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man." The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!"

#### Reflection

This is written on the day they are commemorating the centenary of the Battle of Amiens, August 8th 1918. They do so in that great cathedral, full of memorials and memories, that was miraculously spared the ravages of 2 wars and left unbroken – unlike David's heart, as he grieved for his wayward son Absalom.

You read this in November, always a time for Remembrance – all the Saints and all the Fallen. I remember my great uncle Albert, just a little lad, who enlisted illegally at 15 in 1914 and was dead on the Somme at 17. Like all the others, he has his memorial stone and the words of remembrance: "His mother's pride, he fought and died, he is now at rest".

Sunday 18th November PSALM 73 1-10

The Rev'd David Coaker, minister of Grays URC and a chaplain to the Moderators of GA

Surely the LORD is good to Israël,  
To those who in their hearts are true and pure.  
But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;  
My foothold had become quite insecure.

For when I saw the wicked prospering,  
I envied them their arrogant success.  
They keep their bodies healthy, fit and strong;  
They do not have to struggle with distress.

They are not plagued by human weaknesses;  
From burdens common to mankind they're free.  
They therefore clothe themselves with violence;  
Pride is their necklace, flaunted shamelessly.

Their callous hearts pour out iniquity;  
The follies of their minds are limitless.  
They scoff, and in malicious tones they speak;  
In arrogance they threaten to oppress.

Their mouths lay claim to ownership of heaven;  
With words they take control of many lands.  
Therefore their people always turn to them  
And get abundant waters from their hands.

#### Reflection

Hopefully reading the first ten verses of this Psalm will encourage you to read the next eighteen!

The writer gives us one verse of assurance, one of insecurity, and then eight of envy. But, if you read on, the writer is drawn close to God through a visit to the Temple and the Psalm ends, as it begins, declaring the blessing of God.

The sentiment the Psalmist describes is ever with people of faith. The challenge of living a faithful life, and the sacrifice that entails, when it seems that everyone is effortlessly better off whilst giving God no mind at all.

In our comparatively tolerant and prosperous society we can find ourselves nodding along to the Psalmist's words – but how totally heart-breaking it must be for those who live out their faith in the face of persecution and harassment.

The challenges we face in the UK are apathy, incomprehension, and being indiscernible. Often we are hidden in the background of everyday life, and are only brought to mind as a historically quaint anecdote or in the face of major life events.

But we can hold on to the words of assurance we hear later in the Psalm where within the activity of religious life people can be drawn closer to God. It is in these possibilities that we can find our sure-footing.

Prayer

Eternal Father, in the struggles of life and faith you are with us; offering not a magic wand to generate faith but, instead, knowledge of you.

You challenge us to follow your ways, explore your Word and your World, as, through prayer and praise, we draw closer to you.

We give thanks for regular worship, quiet service to others, or the challenges presented and for the quiet accompaniment in the face of life's hardest times.  
Amen

[Monday 19th November Hilda of Whitby](#)

The Rev'd Ruth Dillon is minister at Fleet URC and Beacon Hill URC Hindhead in the Wessex Synod.

Information

Hilda was born in 614 of the royal house of Northumbria. Baptised in York at the age of twelve by the Roman missionary Paulinus, she was later an influential lay leader of the Church. She was encouraged by Aidan of Lindisfarne to take

"if there is guilt in me, kill me" - at least, that's what he says in the Greek Old Testament, and perhaps the variation matters for today's story.

Fast forward one civil war later, and that beautiful head of hair is, unfortunately, lodged in a tree. This is the most absurd death in the Bible, told as though a set of film shots focussing on little details. We start with the mule, we see the tree, Absalom gets caught in the oak, but on goes the mule without him, and he is trapped in a place of judgement - hung between heaven and earth – and surrounded by enemies.

The Bible I have open calls this story “Absalom dies in battle”, but it's more like summary justice. Joab takes that standing invitation to be the one who will determine Absalom's guilt and end his life. The death is brutal, prolonged, and shameful. Notice that they drop him deep into an existing hole in the ground, so that his body cannot be retrieved. That grave you've heard of in the Valley of the Kings? That was just an act of vanity by a barren prince. Absalom is shamed in his death, as David shamed Saul's kin by refusing them a burial. In this late stage of a tragedy, we know Joab will have to die for this later. As in most tragedies, even when narrative justice is served, all the death seems pointless and profoundly sad.

Could not the models of forgiveness and repentance which we learn through faithfully following our God provide another ending, in which deep wrong is faced, named, acknowledged and worked through, and no-one murders anyone? Too late for David and his children, but not for us.

Prayer

God who has forgiven me,  
may I work to be forgiven and to forgive,  
for as long as these works take,  
and when I face Christ at the time of judgement, have mercy on me, a sinner.

[Friday 30th November David's Grief](#)

The Rev'd Peter Moth is a retired minister in the Northern Synod and a member of St Andrew's URC Kenton, Newcastle upon Tyne.

2 Samuel 18: 24 - 33

you to give us support from the city.” The king answered, “I will do whatever seems best to you.” So the king stood beside the gate while all his men marched out in units of hundreds and of thousands.

The king commanded Joab, Abishai and Ittai, “Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake.” And all the troops heard the king giving orders concerning Absalom to each of the commanders.

David’s army marched out of the city to fight Israel, and the battle took place in the forest of Ephraim. There Israel’s troops were routed by David’s men, and the casualties that day were great—twenty thousand men. The battle spread out over the whole countryside, and the forest swallowed up more men that day than the sword.

Now Absalom happened to meet David’s men. He was riding his mule, and as the mule went under the thick branches of a large oak, Absalom’s hair got caught in the tree. He was left hanging in midair, while the mule he was riding kept on going. When one of the men saw what had happened, he told Joab, “I just saw Absalom hanging in an oak tree.” Joab said to the man who had told him this, “What! You saw him? Why didn’t you strike him to the ground right there? Then I would have had to give you ten shekels of silver and a warrior’s belt.” But the man replied, “Even if a thousand shekels were weighed out into my hands, I would not lay a hand on the king’s son. In our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, ‘Protect the young man Absalom for my sake.’ And if I had put my life in jeopardy—and nothing is hidden from the king—you would have kept your distance from me.” Joab said, “I’m not going to wait like this for you.” So he took three javelins in his hand and plunged them into Absalom’s heart while Absalom was still alive in the oak tree. And ten of Joab’s armor-bearers surrounded Absalom, struck him and killed him. Then Joab sounded the trumpet, and the troops stopped pursuing Israel, for Joab halted them. They took Absalom, threw him into a big pit in the forest and piled up a large heap of rocks over him. Meanwhile, all the Israelites fled to their homes.

#### Reflection

Seven days ago we read the story in which David forgave Absalom. An odd story, in which Absalom’s pretty hair was weighed and measured, and Absalom argued to be allowed back into his father's presence. Back then, he said to Joab

monastic vows, and subsequently established a monastery at Whitby. This house became a great centre of learning and was the meeting-place for the important Synod of Whitby in the year 664 at which Hilda's rôle was that of a reconciler between the Roman and the Celtic traditions. She is remembered as a great educator. She died on 17 November in the year 680.

Reading: Ephesians 4. 1-6

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

#### Reflection

Unity does not just happen, we have to work at it. In the United Reformed Church, unity is one of the core values and the gift it offers to the wider Body of Christ; unity with our brother and sister, unity with other denominations and unity with those people who we find it difficult to love, yet in Christ, all are one body.

Often differences among people can lead to division. Instead of focussing on what divides us, we should remember what unites us:

- ONE Body
- ONE Spirit
- ONE Lord
- ONE Faith
- ONE Baptism
- ONE God

No one is ever going to be perfect here on earth, so we must accept and love other Christians in spite of their faults. This is difficult when we see and hear Christians in the media, who are directly in opposition to the Gospel values, and instead adhere to the “prosperity gospel” where the poor never get a mention.

Unity is one of the Spirit’s gifts and, where She leads, we must be willing to follow. Each person has a special ability to strengthen the whole Body. This is

the essence of Hilda's ministry here on earth. In the midst of a world where women were struggling to find a foothold, Hilda came with her intellect, wit and wisdom to bring unity to a group of believers who needed a role model, and to unite two opposing cultures.

Paul challenges each one of us today to live, worthy of the name 'Christian' meaning Christ's one. This includes being humble, gentle, patient, understanding and peaceful. People are watching how you live your life.

Can people see Christ in you?

Prayer

Through the turmoil and through the celebration;  
Christ, where you lead, I will follow.

Through the fear and through the hope;  
Christ, where you lead, I will follow.

Through the division and through the unity;  
Christ, where you lead, I will follow.

Through the hurt and through the joy;  
Christ, where you lead, I will follow.  
Amen

[Tuesday 20th November The Rape of Tamar](#)

The Rev'd Angela Rigby is minister at Christ Church URC Tonbridge and St Johns Hill URC Sevenoaks.

from 2 Samuel 13: 1 - 22

Some time passed. David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her. Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. He said to him, 'O son of the king, why are you so

the respective households, Absalom chose to seek a second opinion because of his own inadequacy and vulnerability. The narrative is terse: eventually Ahithophel's rejection and shame led him to end it all! Was his suicide a responsible act, you might ask? Even in recent times, ending one's life in such contexts might be deemed honourable.

However, there will be times when our Christian pilgrimage is tough. We will face prejudice, misunderstanding and will experience rejection not least because of the views and position that we might adopt. That should preclude, however, any hasty decision or drastic action on our part, where consequences could be hurtful or harmful to those whom we journey with.

Unbeknown to Absalom, Hushai had double-crossed him. This seeking of an alternative strategy ultimately cost him his life. As we had already read in 2 Samuel 12.10, the curse that the 'sword shall never depart from your house' is increasingly realised in David's dysfunctional family, whose sole preoccupation was to seek vengeance and right succession to the throne.

Dear God,  
Grant us always,  
especially in times of crisis in our domestic, ecclesiastical and national lives:  
the discernment of your will for all peoples,  
the wisdom to know when and how to act,  
and the courage to know when trust is genuine. Amen

[Thursday 29th November The death of Absalom](#)

The Rev'd Dr 'frin Lewis-Smith is Minister to the URCs in Darwen and Tockholes

2 Samuel 18: 1 - 17

David mustered the men who were with him and appointed over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. David sent out his troops, a third under the command of Joab, a third under Joab's brother Abishai son of Zeruiah, and a third under Ittai the Gittite. The king told the troops, "I myself will surely march out with you." But the men said, "You must not go out; if we are forced to flee, they won't care about us. Even if half of us die, they won't care; but you are worth ten thousand of us. It would be better now for

and so. Now send a message at once and tell David, 'Do not spend the night at the fords in the wilderness; cross over without fail, or the king and all the people with him will be swallowed up.'" Jonathan and Ahimaaz were staying at En Rogel. A female servant was to go and inform them, and they were to go and tell King David, for they could not risk being seen entering the city. But a young man saw them and told Absalom. So the two of them left at once and went to the house of a man in Bahurim. He had a well in his courtyard, and they climbed down into it. His wife took a covering and spread it out over the opening of the well and scattered grain over it. No one knew anything about it. When Absalom's men came to the woman at the house, they asked, "Where are Ahimaaz and Jonathan?" The woman answered them, "They crossed over the brook." The men searched but found no one, so they returned to Jerusalem. After they had gone, the two climbed out of the well and went to inform King David. They said to him, "Set out and cross the river at once; Ahithophel has advised such and such against you." So David and all the people with him set out and crossed the Jordan. By daybreak, no one was left who had not crossed the Jordan. When Ahithophel saw that his advice had not been followed, he saddled his donkey and set out for his house in his hometown. He put his house in order and then hanged himself. So he died and was buried in his father's tomb.

### Reflection

It is a natural human tendency to seek another opinion, be it the need for medical or surgical treatment, or obtaining a proper 'diagnosis' about a crumbling brickwork before commissioning the right builder, or simply where to go for your next holiday! It is also tempting at times to make a quick or hasty decision and not be obsessed with the outcome.

Ahithophel naturally felt that he had acted in a responsible manner. Here, as the sordid saga of David's family continues, we find royal mismanagement, misguided advice and divided loyalties all coming to the fore. King David is still on the run fearful of his avenging son. Absalom's desperate plight meant that it was difficult for him to be able to discern true counsel and the right course of action in relation to his father. Perhaps, it is one of those 'should have' moments that he needed to strike while the iron is hot!

Ahithophel's shrewd advice was given in good faith and borne out of an experience of military manoeuvres. While trust is notably absent throughout

haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?' Amnon said to him, 'I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister.' Jonadab said to him, 'Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill; and when your father comes to see you, say to him, "Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" So Amnon lay down, and pretended to be ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, 'Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand.' Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, 'Go to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him.' So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat. Amnon said, 'Send out everyone from me.' So everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, 'Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand.' So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, 'Come, lie with me, my sister.' She answered him, 'No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you.' But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she was, he forced her and lay with her. Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her. Amnon said to her, 'Get out!' But she said to him, 'No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me.' But he would not listen to her. He called the young man who served him and said, 'Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her.' ...So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her. But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went. Her brother Absalom said to her, 'Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart.' So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house. 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. But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar.

## Reflection

We are meant to notice the awful behaviour of the boys. Amnon's rape of Tamar inspires Absalom's deceitful behaviour in 2 Samuel 13:23-38. Both die deaths worthy of their behaviour. Sin leads to death. That's what we are meant to notice. 'Boys will be boys.' Male leaders might grab women 'by the whatever', but ultimately, one day, they will suffer because of it. In the days of #metoo and increased awareness of the importance of safe sacred spaces for children and vulnerable adults, the traditional way of looking at this passage grates. The traditional view no longer holds life-giving water.

Notice how King David does nothing. He's like a minister not reporting a matter to the church's safeguarding officer. Worse, his palace is like the church without a safeguarding officer. Or an Eldership which never reviews its policy (if it has one). Tamar is groomed for sex against her will, and King David does nothing to protect her or give her justice. The only one who does act - her brother Absalom - tells Tamar to be quiet.

Now - forget the privileged men and notice Tamar. In this story, we see her cooking and helping her brother who she thought was ill. In the whole Bible, we only have record of Tamar speaking twice – refusing sex and again after the rape. She shows concern for him, for Israel, and for herself. But Tamar's words are not heeded, and she is raped. Her body is violated. Her future is wrecked. In her culture, shame is heaped upon her. She rips up her robe and puts ashes on her head. She was in full blown lament over being raped when she runs to her brother Absalom for help. He tells her to be quiet. Having been silenced by rape and a command, she "remained a desolate woman", presumably forced to lament in secrecy.

Tamar's question echoes unanswered even now. Where could she carry her shame?

Holy God,  
Help us to make our church communities safer places for everyone.  
Help us to be vigilant regarding our Safeguarding practices.  
Help us to not ignore the Tamars of the world  
when they seek support or justice.  
And God for those who understand Tamar's pain all too well,  
give courage, justice, and restoration. In Jesus name we pray, Amen

Hilary Mantel, writer of many volumes of historical fiction, giving the Reith Lectures on Radio Four in 2017, caused a certain amount of – let's call it debate – in our household by making a distinction between historical fact (what historians write) and faithful representation which is what novelists and poets aim to produce. Of course we need both, but facts are not always easy to determine and the past is not easily recreated 400 years on.

Human beings don't change much in essence down the centuries: wheeling and dealing for power still goes on; the powerful still exploit the weak; conflict still destroys the innocent as well as – often instead of – the guilty. And somewhere most days business deals, political plots and weapons sales are completed without much regard for the needs of the poorest.

And in our day the God of love and justice determines, not to bring disaster on us – though we sometimes inflict that on ourselves – but use us to share love and justice throughout the world.

Chaplains have a mantra when they visit a workplace: "Find out what God is doing here, and join in." It may be a challenge but it won't be disaster.

## Prayer

God, you do not plan disaster.  
You do not hide yourself from us;  
instead, you invite us into relationship with you  
and you allow us to reflect your love  
so that others may be drawn to worship you.  
Ordinary people, followers of Jesus,  
may we take on your nature and be transformed  
so that we too can change the world.

[Wednesday 28th November Plans Frustrated](#)

Andy Lie, Ecumenical & Inter-Faith Officer, URC Northern Synod

2 Samuel 17: 15 - 23

Hushai told Zadok and Abiathar, the priests, "Ahithophel has advised Absalom and the elders of Israel to do such and such, but I have advised them to do so

of those around us and guard us against advice we know in our hearts to be bad advice and not of you. Amen.

Tuesday 27th November Hushai's Counsel

The Rev'd Heather Pencavel, retired Minister, Thornbury URC, Gloucestershire

2 Samuel 17: 5 - 14

But Absalom said, "Summon also Hushai the Arkite, so we can hear what he has to say as well." When Hushai came to him, Absalom said, "Ahithophel has given this advice. Should we do what he says? If not, give us your opinion." Hushai replied to Absalom, "The advice Ahithophel has given is not good this time. You know your father and his men; they are fighters, and as fierce as a wild bear robbed of her cubs. Besides, your father is an experienced fighter; he will not spend the night with the troops. Even now, he is hidden in a cave or some other place. And if he should attack your troops first, whoever hears about it will say, 'There has been a slaughter among the troops who follow Absalom.' Then even the bravest soldier, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will melt with fear, for all Israel knows that your father is a fighter and that those with him are brave. "So I advise you: Let all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba—as numerous as the sand on the seashore—be gathered to you, with you yourself leading them into battle. Then we will attack him wherever he may be found, and we will fall on him as dew settles on the ground. Neither he nor any of his men will be left alive. If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel will bring ropes to that city, and we will drag it down to the valley until not so much as a pebble is left." Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The advice of Hushai the Arkite is better than that of Ahithophel." For the Lord had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom.

Reflection

It is all determined. God's plan all along was to bring disaster on Absalom. In the stories of the Kings of Israel, as written here, more than four centuries later, the Kings are, by definition, blessed by God, and those trying unsuccessfully to depose them are subject to God's wrath. Absalom never had a chance: all the plotting and deceit, all the advice he heard (good and bad), the arguments, the promises, the proposals might as well never have been offered. He was doomed. He had it coming. His plotting failed. He was history.

Wednesday 21st November Absalom's Revenge

The Rev'd Elizabeth Gray-King, Education & Learning Programme Officer, member St Columba's URC

from 2 Samuel 13: 23 - 39

After two full years Absalom had sheep shearers at Baal-hazor, which is near Ephraim, and Absalom invited all the king's sons. Absalom came to the king, and said, 'Your servant has sheep shearers; will the king and his servants please go with your servant?' But the king said to Absalom, 'No, my son, let us not all go, or else we will be burdensome to you.' He pressed him, but he would not go but gave him his blessing. Then Absalom said, 'If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us.' The king said to him, 'Why should he go with you?' But Absalom pressed him until he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him. Absalom made a feast like a king's feast. Then Absalom commanded his servants, 'Watch when Amnon's heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, "Strike Amnon", then kill him. Do not be afraid; have I not myself commanded you? Be courageous and valiant.' So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king's sons rose, and each mounted his mule and fled. While they were on the way, the report came to David that Absalom had killed all the king's sons, and not one of them was left. The king rose, tore his garments, and lay on the ground; and all his servants who were standing by tore their garments. But Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah, said, 'Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men the king's sons; Amnon alone is dead. This has been determined by Absalom from the day Amnon raped his sister Tamar. Now therefore, do not let my lord the king take it to heart, as if all the king's sons were dead; for Amnon alone is dead.' But Absalom fled, and went to Talmi son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. David mourned for his son day after day. Absalom, having fled to Geshur, stayed there for three years. And the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom; for he was now consoled over the death of Amnon.

Reflection

Why? Why tell this despicable family saga? Why? What earthly good news can we find in this obscene revenge for an even more obscene rape? A king's first born, goaded by a friend, rapes then hates his half-sister, a crime unreported by said King. This King of many wives, and even more lovers, gets deeply upset, not at the time of the rape of his daughter by his son, but at this killing of his

rapist first born at the hands of the favourite other son. Why on earth would a faithful following of people want to retell this myth so fully again and again that it had to be written?? This is a shameful tale from beginning to end.

Perhaps that's where our good news oddly is. There is violence, family abuse, hatred of women, goading of men, abusive leadership, deceit everywhere, even in a king's household, often multiplied in a king's household. It's human nature, frustratingly and painful enough. Yet, myths are used to tell great truths, not historical facts. Perhaps the intention of this awful tale is to help listeners grow the courage to speak up with "me too." Perhaps these stories are to have us argue about justice, expose truth, and bring ourselves to ask for help when we realise we can say, "me too."

It seems shocking abuse to me that King David's story has been washed of its shame in many Christian summaries - David is the little courageous one against the giant Goliath, faithful theoretical author of Psalms. Michelangelo gives him icon status in his beautiful statue in Florence. Abuse is typically silenced. Let's not engage in that. Let's bring David off his hero plinth. It's OK for him to a flawed human. In the tales of flawed humans, we encourage truth.

#### Prayer

Oh God, it is hard to tell truth.  
We can feel more victimised than at the time of abuse.  
Yet, we know that peace with ourselves comes when our experiences are heard.  
Remind us deeply that with your Spirit-filled help, our story can be history rather than a hidden and raw present.  
Give peace and insight to all who hear.  
Give gracious kindness to all who share these stories.  
In the name of Jesus and in the power of your Spirit, Amen.

[Thursday 22nd November Absalom Forgiven](#)

The Rev'd Fiona Thomas, Secretary for Education & Learning of the URC and a member of Christ Church, Bellingham.

2 Samuel 14: 25 - 33

Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised so much for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no

weary and discouraged, and throw him into a panic; and all the people who are with him will flee. I will strike down only the king, and I will bring all the people back to you as a bride comes home to her husband. You seek the life of only one man, and all the people will be at peace.' The advice pleased Absalom and all the elders of Israel.

#### Reflection

There is such a thing as bad advice, even when we think that the advice giver is someone we can trust implicitly. I read about a young boy recently, whose father (whom he trusted) told him a broken escalator was voice activated. The boy spent ten minutes shouting go up before his dad finally admitted the truth!

Absalom sought Ahithophel's advice. He was hugely respected, and his advice was treated as though God himself had spoken it. Ahithophel's advice though, may not have been the right advice on this occasion. He was a strong supporter of Absalom and he feared that there might be some sort of late reconciliation between father and son which would expose those who had thrown their weight behind Absalom to great danger. By committing this act, it could be seen by his followers that Absalom was committed to the revolt wholeheartedly and this insecurity would be no more. Ahithophel regards this act as an irrevocable step and this is why he wants Absalom to take it. It will make his name muck in the eyes of his father. To have your own son defile your concubines in such a public arena would have been an outright humiliation and would have also been seen as a direct challenge to the throne. Ahithophel calculated this would destroy any affection which David still had for his son and would make it necessary for Absalom to go on with the revolt right up until the bitter end.

We have to be careful where we look for advice and guidance. Sadly, we live in a broken world and the hatred others feel can easily permeate into our lives if we are not guarded against it. Remember friends, the words of Philippians 4:8; whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

#### Prayer

Loving God, sometimes we seek advice in the wrong places, we make mistakes and we end up hurting others. Help us to seek only your will rather than the will

In terms of our Christian faith, it's a Good Friday experience. However much we enter imaginatively into the awfulness of the death of Jesus on the Cross, we cannot avoid the fact that the testimony on which we rely comes from witnesses who are already convinced of the reality of a risen Lord. We read the Passion in the light of the Resurrection. So in times of deepest darkness we may have hope.

Prayer:

Ever living and ever loving God,  
be my guide today through all darkness and perplexity.  
be my strength in times of testing.  
and gladden my heart with your peace,  
through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen

[Monday 26th November The Counsel of Ahithophel](#)

The Rev'd Josh Thomas, Minister of Petersfield and Liss URC with The Beacon Church, Bordon

2 Samuel 16:15 - 17:4

Now Absalom and all the Israelites came to Jerusalem; Ahithophel was with him. When Hushai the Archite, David's friend, came to Absalom, Hushai said to Absalom, 'Long live the king! Long live the king!' Absalom said to Hushai, 'Is this your loyalty to your friend? Why did you not go with your friend?' Hushai said to Absalom, 'No; but the one whom the Lord and this people and all the Israelites have chosen, his I will be, and with him I will remain. Moreover, whom should I serve? Should it not be his son? Just as I have served your father, so I will serve you.' Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, 'Give us your counsel; what shall we do?' Ahithophel said to Absalom, 'Go in to your father's concubines, the ones he has left to look after the house; and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened.' So they pitched a tent for Absalom upon the roof; and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel. Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the oracle of God; so all the counsel of Ahithophel was esteemed, both by David and by Absalom. Moreover, Ahithophel said to Absalom, 'Let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will set out and pursue David tonight. I will come upon him while he is

blemish in him. When he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king's weight. There were born to Absalom three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar; she was a beautiful woman. So Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem without coming into the king's presence. Then Absalom sent for Joab to send him to the king; but Joab would not come to him. He sent a second time, but Joab would not come. Then he said to his servants, 'Look, Joab's field is next to mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire.' So Absalom's servants set the field on fire. Then Joab rose and went to Absalom at his house, and said to him, 'Why have your servants set my field on fire?' Absalom answered Joab, 'Look, I sent word to you: Come here, that I may send you to the king with the question, "Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still." Now let me go into the king's presence; if there is guilt in me, let him kill me!' Then Joab went to the king and told him; and he summoned Absalom. So he came to the king and prostrated himself with his face to the ground before the king; and the king kissed Absalom.

Reflection

This intricate story could have been said in fewer words: "Having been brought back to Jerusalem from safety abroad, King David's son Absalom lived for two years in internal exile in Jerusalem, before being forgiven by his father for killing his half-brother Amnon." Such summaries would make the Bible much shorter but strip it of its ability to confront us with the human reality of wrestling with forgiveness and revenge, justice and injustice, responsibility and choices, patience and impatience.

So we're told that Absalom was handsome, with a wonderful head of hair – nearly 3kg produced on his annual trip to the barber. There's the detail of what he called his daughter, continuing in her the memory of his sister whose rape he avenged when his father David was slow to act against the perpetrator. Joab the army commander, acting with his characteristic mixture of cool pragmatism, political shrewdness, and loyalty to his king and his people had earlier enabled David to bring Absalom back to Jerusalem. But Absalom wants more – being in limbo isn't enough and his impatience to be re-integrated grows. Joab is keeping him at arm's length, and not returning his calls. With the summer we've had it's particularly alarming to think of setting a field on fire, but it certainly attracts Joab's attention. Absalom gets the result he sought – closeness to

David, forgiven by a man who loves him and who is also aware of the need to preserve a potential heir.

The years in external and internal exile have given Absalom space to start contemplating a coup. Will his father's forgiveness be enough to stop the wheels that have been set in motion?

Prayer

Gracious God

Help us take responsibility for our thoughts, words, and actions  
Give us the courage to choose forgiveness over revenge  
Show us the way to be reconcilers in families and communities  
And when we find ourselves lost in the bigger picture  
Being us home to our best selves and to you. Amen

[Friday 23rd November Absalom plots against David](#)

The Rev'd Colin Hunt, retired minister worshipping at Hutton & Shenfield Union Church, Essex

2 Samuel 15: 1 - 12

After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run ahead of him. Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the road into the gate; and when anyone brought a suit before the king for judgement, Absalom would call out and say, 'From what city are you?' When the person said, 'Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel', Absalom would say, 'See, your claims are good and right; but there is no one deputed by the king to hear you.' Absalom said moreover, 'If only I were judge in the land! Then all who had a suit or cause might come to me, and I would give them justice.' Whenever people came near to do obeisance to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of them, and kiss them. Thus Absalom did to every Israelite who came to the king for judgement; so Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel. At the end of four years Absalom said to the king, 'Please let me go to Hebron and pay the vow that I have made to the Lord. For your servant made a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram: If the Lord will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will worship the Lord in Hebron.' The king said to him, 'Go in peace.' So he got up, and went to Hebron. But Absalom sent secret messengers throughout all the

Remember where you dwelt upon Mount Zion,  
and turn your steps towards these ruined walls—  
All this destruction which the foe in malice  
has perpetrated on your sacred halls.

Your enemies have roared in your assembly;  
their standards fly victorious in the breeze.  
Their fury was like woodmen wielding axes  
to cut through undergrowth between the trees.

They smashed to pieces all the fretted woodwork—  
with axe and hatchet every panelled frame.  
They burned your holy sanctuary to ashes,  
and made unclean the place where dwells your Name.

Their thought was, "We will utterly destroy them!"  
They burned each place of worship in the land.  
We see no miracles; there are no prophets,  
and no one knows when all these things will end.

Reflection

God's people are feeling battered and bewildered. The precise historical setting of this Psalm is not clear. But what is clear is that God, their God, has turned against them. Like a wild animal, his nostrils are smoking in rage. Why? The question hangs in the air. Their enemies have gone on the rampage, pulverising their sacred buildings, trashing their sanctuary, hacking to pieces the delicate carved woodwork, burning them to the ground. All that the people hold sacred – gone. And gone with it too is their sense of identity. There are no prophets to tell them where they might have gone wrong, no-one to give them hope for the future. When will this ever end?

The Psalmist's angst is very real. We recognise how he feels. But more than that, the lament also speaks for us. In times of national emergency when we cannot put our pain into words the Psalm articulates it on our behalf. That is helpful. We realise that experiences that are so frighteningly unfamiliar to us have been endured by others already. They have lived through what is unimaginable and come out the other side.

same words as Ittai's protestation, "Wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or life, there also your servant will be."

In both stories we encounter the same dynamics of a near-fatally weakened leader not just learning who is ready to betray him, but also discovering who is ready to run away rather than remain with him to the end. We know the later story and its outcomes well enough. The brave words of Peter change quickly to outraged denial; and only the women (and in John's account one disciple) will be found standing at the Cross.

But in this story we meet with characters we've had less opportunity to come to know and scrutinise. Which is how things usually are in life, so that the person who reckons themselves to be a good judge of character can often be badly mistaken. David had thought Ahithophel to be someone he could rely on—the kind of ally one might need in cabinet meetings, or even elders' meetings. I wonder how much thought he'd given to the reliability of Ittai, the sojourner-cum-refugee who appears in the story out of nowhere. But unlike those later disciples who fled in all directions, Ittai is true to his promise of loyalty, and keeps his whole company loyal and together. They march on across the Kidron, into the dark and the wilderness.

#### Prayer

Gracious God  
keep me faithful to the promises I've made  
and may my loyalty to you  
be a strengthening and encouragement to others  
wherever life's way may lead us. Amen

Sunday 25th November [PSALM 74 1-9](#)

The Rev'd Fleur Houston is a retired minister and member of Macclesfield and Bollington URC

O God, why have you cast us off for ever?  
Why rage against the sheep within your fold?  
Do not forget the people whom you purchased,  
the heritage which you redeemed of old.

tribes of Israel, saying, 'As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then shout: Absalom has become king at Hebron!' Two hundred men from Jerusalem went with Absalom; they were invited guests, and they went in their innocence, knowing nothing of the matter. While Absalom was offering the sacrifices, he sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counsellor, from his city Giloh. The conspiracy grew in strength, and the people with Absalom kept increasing.

#### Reflection

'O what tangled webs we weave.' Absalom was a charismatic character like his father David. Today's reading is about his plot against his own father to gain power. By going to Hebron, he was returning to his home town (2 Samuel 3 v 2) where he anticipated finding support from loyal friends. Being apparently good looking, and somewhat vain, he hoped to win the hearts of the people by his good looks. Today he might be regarded as 'a celebrity' who today might appear on 'Towie'. Clearly, he is a somewhat shallow character.

This story raises questions about motivation. The motivation in question might be that of our political leaders, or indeed ourselves, searching for status and personal power over others. They and we adopt the "I am always right" attitude, even when that is not the case. In our worship, or our relationships with others, why do we do what we do or say? Is it simply for personal gain of some sort or another? What many regard as the norm today is but a reflection of what was going on in Absalom's life. What might the alternative be?

In a number of past devotions there has been reference to an individual's comfort zones, where people are seeking to be safe in a non-threatening situation. But we have been urged to take up our cross daily. That could well involve being the servant of all rather than the leader of all. It might also involve our surrendering something we regard as valuable so that others might gain. I once worked for a Welsh Congregationalist whose lifestyle was the very opposite of that portrayed by Absalom. Regardless of the cost to himself in both time and money, the needs of others came well before his own needs. A man respected by the whole community. Unlike Absalom, he did things the right way according to his faith in Jesus. May that be our experience also.

## Prayer

Loving and sacrificial God,  
guide us when we are tempted  
to do our own thing regardless  
of the needs of others.

We pray for humility in our lives  
whereby others may see a reflection  
of your love and care for all in this world.

Change our attitudes and ways  
to reflect the depth of your love and grace. Amen.

### Saturday 24th November David Flees

The Rev'd John Durell is a retired minister and member of Waddington Street URC, Durham

### 2 Samuel 15: 13 - 37

A messenger came and told David, "The hearts of the people of Israel are with Absalom." Then David said to all his officials who were with him in Jerusalem, "Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will move quickly to overtake us and bring ruin on us and put the city to the sword." The king's officials answered him, "Your servants are ready to do whatever our lord the king chooses." The king set out, with his entire household following him; but he left ten concubines to take care of the palace. So the king set out, with all the people following him, and they halted at the edge of the city. All his men marched past him, along with all the Kerethites and Pelethites; and all the six hundred Gittites who had accompanied him from Gath marched before the king. The king said to Ittai the Gittite, "Why should you come along with us? Go back and stay with King Absalom. You are a foreigner, an exile from your homeland. You came only yesterday. And today shall I make you wander about with us, when I do not know where I am going? Go back, and take your people with you. May the Lord show you kindness and faithfulness."

But Ittai replied to the king, "As surely as the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be." David said to Ittai, "Go ahead, march on." So Ittai the

Gittite marched on with all his men and the families that were with him. The whole countryside wept aloud as all the people passed by. The king also crossed the Kidron Valley, and all the people moved on toward the wilderness. Zadok was there, too, and all the Levites who were with him were carrying the ark of the covenant of God. They set down the ark of God, and Abiathar offered sacrifices until all the people had finished leaving the city. Then the king said to Zadok, "Take the ark of God back into the city. If I find favour in the Lord's eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if he says, 'I am not pleased with you,' then I am ready; let him do to me whatever seems good to him." The king also said to Zadok the priest, "Do you understand? Go back to the city with my blessing. Take your son Ahimaaz with you, and also Abiathar's son Jonathan. You and Abiathar return with your two sons. I will wait at the fords in the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me." So Zadok and Abiathar took the ark of God back to Jerusalem and stayed there. But David continued up the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went; his head was covered and he was barefoot. All the people with him covered their heads too and were weeping as they went up. Now David had been told, "Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom." So David prayed, "Lord, turn Ahithophel's counsel into foolishness." When David arrived at the summit, where people used to worship God, Hushai the Arkite was there to meet him, his robe torn and dust on his head. David said to him, "If you go with me, you will be a burden to me. But if you return to the city and say to Absalom, 'Your Majesty, I will be your servant; I was your father's servant in the past, but now I will be your servant,' then you can help me by frustrating Ahithophel's advice. Won't the priests Zadok and Abiathar be there with you? Tell them anything you hear in the king's palace. Their two sons, Ahimaaz son of Zadok and Jonathan son of Abiathar, are there with them. Send them to me with anything you hear." So Hushai, David's confidant, arrived at Jerusalem as Absalom was entering the city.

### Reflection

According to the fourth gospel, Jesus followed in David's footsteps on the night of his own betrayal. John alone identifies the garden where he met with his betrayers after supper as being in the Kidron Valley. But where was the equivalent of Ittai the Gittite that night?

Jesus had already spoken about loyalty: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also" (John 12.26). It's almost the