

#### **Trinity 4. A sermon preached by Nick Moir at St Andrew's Chesterton on 28 June 2015.**

*How are the mighty fallen. Tell it not in Gath.*

David laments the end of Saul who has fallen along with his son Jonathan in battle against the Philistines. The Philistines were the sea people, migrants who had crossed the Mediterranean and settled on the shore to the west of Israel and were moving inwards. They were the Vikings of their period. Both Saul and David had won their spurs militarily against them in previous battles. Saul had been a great military leader uniting the 12 tribes against a common foe. He was an anointed king, anointed with oil by the prophet Samuel and anointed by the Spirit, a charismatic leader and personality. Interestingly today's passage speaks of Saul's shield being anointed – or rather being anointed no more – v21. We saw the significance enduring into the middle ages last week with the shields of the Magna Carta barons and their heraldry (as well as the brothers in arms relationship akin to that between David and Saul's son, Jonathan).

David laments the king but the intervening narrative has told the tale of how Saul had taken against David, displaying mental instability and hurling a spear at him. The power seemed to be draining away from one king and being poured upon his already anointed successor. Saul ends up hunting down his rival who becomes a fugitive and an outlaw. So David would have every reason to rejoice in the death of his persecutor but rather he laments – for David is big enough to see beyond the recent history to one he saw as glorious – 'your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places'. 'Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon.' – these were the cities of the Philistines. He didn't want the daughters of the Philistines rejoicing. 'Tell it not in Gath' has thus entered our language – I use it when I have to acknowledge something positive in the other side of an argument. Tell it not in Gath, but that was quite a good point he made there...

I've been thinking about that with all stuff there's been about Napoleon and the battle of Waterloo whose 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary was this last week. I've been quite interested that even the right wing, conservative historian Andrew Roberts has been telling us that he is quite a fan of Napoleon. 'Tell it not in Paris, but actually your Napoleon might not have been so bad after all'.

Tell it not in Paris but he won most of his wars and the vast majority of his battles; his military techniques are still studied worldwide.

Tell it not in Paris but he was a highly popular reforming leader in France and across Europe, cutting to across the feudal class system talent-spotting those of lowly birth and making them generals and establishing a system of public education.

Tell it not in Paris but he oversaw a legal system and code that has been imitated worldwide.

Tell it not in Paris but he emancipated and protected religious minorities, including Jews, and not only tolerated but admired Islam.

Tell it not in Paris but he also came to a concordat with the Catholic church that enabled it to flourish again in France and establish a new relationship with the state.

And, like Saul, his death at the age of 51 was lamented by millions across Europe. In 1840 a million people witnessed his remains returning to Paris.

Despite the fact that Saul turned against him, and his charisma, his Spirit-filledness seemed to depart from him and he lost the love of the people as David gained it – despite all that David mourned his death, saw it as nothing to rejoice in and was able to see the great strengths, the glory, that Saul had had.

How are the mighty fallen... that other expression we still use. It comes to all the mighty in the end – whether it be waning of their powers, a building up of complacent pride that leads to a fall, military or electoral defeat. In the end the mighty of this world all fall, some with reputation intact, most tarnished by their failings.

How are the mighty fallen - history teaches us that kingdoms and empires rise and fall, however mighty they may be. Napoleon came to power in France because of the Revolution of which he was a part - absolute monarchy was unsustainable in a world where there was a thirst for a sharing of power. This country had taken a different course. Thanks partly to the Magna Carta we had already moved away from an absolute monarchy to a dispersed authority, to the beginnings of democracy and parliamentary government. We no longer have to depose our rulers with violence – we put the sword into them through the ballot box. It can be brutal but it spares bloodshed.

But we Christians have learnt from one who was a son of David, a descendant and an anointed one himself – that's what messiah or Christ means – we have learnt not to put our hope in the kingdoms – and kings – of this world. 'My kingdom', he said, 'is not of this world'.

Napoleon is said to have uttered these words – and I have to say there are those who say he couldn't possibly have said this, but at least it's nice to think that he might have done –and should have done:

*Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I myself have founded great empires; but upon what did these creations of our genius depend? Upon force. Jesus alone founded His empire upon love, and to this very day millions will die for Him.*

It is said that the great rise of monasticism in Europe was because the former young warriors of the heathen tribes needed somewhere to channel all their energies. They didn't have football terraces in those days and so they turned to spiritual warfare, their energy channelled into prayer and the religious life. It was those communities that were the spiritual engine rooms of the conversion of Europe. The church – well, the Holy Spirit – found a way of harnessing all that testosterone-inflamed energy into a spiritual army that transformed the world by prayer and acts of charity and the preaching of the gospel. Perhaps one off the keys to the renewal of the church in our day is to engage a generation of young men for whom the church seems a boring irrelevance. But let's have the women too. I was talking to my brother-in-law's wife yesterday – not a churchgoer, but now a great devotee of the Women's Institute, having been talked into going not by her mother but by her daughter (in her twenties). They live in South Wales. Well, I asked her – what on earth do you do in the Welsh WI about singing Jerusalem, with all its talk about England's green and pleasant lands. Oh, we love it she says. They all sing it lustily.

We're going to sing it at the end of our service. We don't often have it as a hymn in a regular service – some people, clergy included, don't think it should be sung as a hymn at all. I beg to differ. It's about building Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant lands, harnessing all our energy, all that might otherwise be committed to warfare and violence, to the cause of establishing God's kingdom on earth, the very thing we always pray for in the words that the son of David taught us. To me it's a right conclusion to all our national remembrances of the Magna Carta and Waterloo. Tell it not at the WI, but they might be on to something.