



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 24th February 2008
by Mark Ashton

10p

2 Samuel 6

Rescuer of the lost ark

The Ark of the Covenant

I have an Australian bachelor friend, who was asked to be a godfather to a friend's child for the first time quite late in life. He did not have any idea at all what was involved in being a godfather, and he did not know how to find out. So he went to see the film . . . but he said that was no help at all!

When we hear mention of the ark, and once we have worked out that this is the ark of the covenant, and not Noah's ark with all the animals, we probably think first of Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. And (while it is always quite hard to tell Indiana Jones from Hans Solo or Jack Ryan or any other of the parts that Harrison Ford has made his own) *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is probably not quite as unhelpful a place to start, as the *Godfather* was for my Aussie friend.

Because the Ark of the Covenant was a religious artefact of enormous significance for the ancient Israelites: an acacia wood box, about four feet long and two feet square, overlaid with gold, and with strange gold statues of Cherubim upon its lid accurately portrayed in that film. (I watched it again yesterday, leaving no stone unturned in researching this sermon!) It did not have spooky magic qualities like the ark for Indiana Jones, but it did represent for the Israelites the presence of the living God among them.

Note verse 2: *He and all his men set out from Baalah of Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim that are on the ark.* The language is a little ambiguous, almost coy, about the relationship of God to the ark. He did not live

inside it. But it did represent His rule, as though He was enthroned above it, and it was a sort of symbolic footstool beneath His throne. It also represented His revelation, because inside it were the two tablets of stone inscribed with the Ten Commandments from when God had given Moses the law on Mount Sinai. And it also represented reconciliation, because the blood from the sacrifice of atonement was sprinkled on the lid and in front of the ark. In fact, its lid was known as the "mercy seat", where men could find mercy, the forgiveness of sins, from God.

The ark is the real hero of our passage today—as we saw in our first reading (1 Samuel 5:1-10), the ark was able to look after itself. These chapters in 2 Samuel are not really a character study of David. They are about God; and the equivalent of the ark for us is the gospel, the message about Jesus Christ, because it is the gospel: that tells us of God's rule over His creation through Jesus, His king; that reveals to us the character of God in Jesus Christ; and that shows us that we can be reconciled to God, through the blood Jesus shed for us on the cross. So the ark is actually the main actor in 2 Samuel 6.

Notice a contrast with the chapter before: in chapter 5 David did all the things a successful monarch in the ancient world was supposed to do: He united the kingdom (vv 1-5); he established his capital (vv 6-10); he achieved international status by his diplomacy (vv 11-12); he set about founding a dynasty (he's breeding like a rabbit (if you'll excuse the expression) in vv 13-15); and he defeated his enemies (vv 17-25). And it all went excellently well.

Now in chapter 6, he does something that was not expected of your average monarch: he decided to put God at the centre of his kingdom: God's king brings God to the centre of God's people. And, strangely, it did not go so well. You will have noticed two sour notes in the chapter, so let's consider them first—There is:

1. The warning of Uzzah

David again brought together out of Israel chosen men, thirty thousand in all. He and all his men set out from Baalah of Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim that are on the ark. They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it (vv 1-4). This is how the Philistines had moved the ark, on an ox-cart, but it was not how God's People had been told to move the ark in the Mosaic Law. They had been told it was to be covered, and carried by Levites on poles—and it was not to be touched. But David ignored God's instructions and opted instead for advanced Philistine technology—the new ox-cart.

It all started fine: *David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals* (v 5). But then it goes horribly wrong: *When they came to the threshing-floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God* (vv 6-7).

I don't know if you have ever attended something that has been marred by an unexpected death? You may have your own painful memory like that. When I first arrived as vicar over twenty years ago, I inherited the role of governor of a local primary school. At my first Governors' meeting, one of the other governors died. In fact, she was laid out on the sofa in the sitting room of the Westcott House Principal's Lodge when I arrived for the first meeting. It put quite a dampener on the proceedings, I can tell you.

But not as much as Uzzah's death did for David. *Then David was angry because the LORD's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah* (v 8). Was David angry with Uzzah? Angry with himself? Angry with God? God's judgement makes us humans angry. That is why Jesus told us that hell is full of those gnashing their teeth. In the previous chapter that 'breaking out' was what God had done against the Philistines in 5:20. And that was what God was expected to do—break out against the enemy, but not against His own people . . . particularly when they are being religious.

Now, we need to note that this is not an individual judgement on Uzzah for personal sin. Uzzah's ultimate salvation is not commented on, verse seven is not as clear as the NIV makes it. This is a temporal judgement on him and on David and all those involved—in fact his death is a gracious sign from God to the whole nation. Do you notice that David did not conclude that they needed someone more holy than Uzzah to accompany the ark the rest of the way?: *David was afraid of the LORD that day and said, How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me? He was not willing to take the ark of the LORD to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the LORD blessed him and his entire household* (vv 9-11).

And then the penny dropped. They had ignored God's revelation. And it had led to death. Look at verse 13 for David's second attempt to move the ark: *When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf*. Now there is a meticulous attention to the details of God's revealed will. There could hardly be a more emphatic warning to us not to try to be religious without listening to God first. That is Uzzah's warning to us: When confronted with the gospel, listen to what God is saying. If you are not a Christian yet, are you prepared to do that? To let God speak to you?

We put a great emphasis on daily Bible reading here at St Andrew the Great (*Explore, The Daily Reading Bible, Step By Step*). I worry that we may sound legalistic sometimes, and obviously we each have complete freedom as to how we listen to God's word. But we must listen to it. If you have come to church this evening, without having

opened God's word this past week, I must warn you: don't be an Uzzah! If you and I do our religion in our own way and on our own terms, we are in danger of judgement. Let me just say that again, if you and I do our religion in our own way and on our own terms, we are in danger of judgement. Did Uzzah die in vain? Or can we learn from him to listen first to God . . . and then work out how to respond appropriately? Don't be an Uzzah!

But don't be a Michal either:

2. The warning of Michal

Now King David was told, The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God. So David went down and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets. As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart (vv 12-16). Michal had an unhappy life. As Saul's daughter, she had fallen in love with David many years before, and he had won the right to marry her by killing 100 Philistines. She had then saved David's life, when her father Saul tried to kill him. But Saul had given her to another man Paltiel, when David had to flee from the court. And Paltiel seems to have been devoted to her and was heart-broken when David demanded to have her back as a condition for uniting the kingdom in 2 Samuel 3.

We are not told more about the state of her restored marriage to David. But Michal clearly had a very strong sense of being a royal princess: notice how she is described three times as '*Michal daughter of Saul*' (in verses 16, 20 and 23) and never as 'Michal, wife of David'.

And of course, Michal was right. *When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of*

his servants as any vulgar fellow would" (v 20). This was demeaning behaviour for a king: to strip off and dance like a teenager. She was the one who knew how kings should act. She was the daughter of royalty. She would have agreed with Thomas Hardy, when he wrote:

"If I have learnt one thing,
It is the passing preciousness of dreams,
That aspects are within us, and who seems
Most kingly is indeed the king"

'Who seems most kingly is indeed the king' Do you remember it had been Saul's appearance which identified him when Samuel first picked him out?—*he was a head taller than any . . . others* (1 Samuel 9:2). And it was all about appearance for Michal: how did David look in the eyes of the people? He looked ridiculous, and she needed to tell him so. 'Who seems most kingly is indeed the king'.

Michal could not see deeper. Faced with the gospel, she could not see God's hand. She was not aware of God's eyes. She only saw the furnishings and the fashions of life, the style, the culture, what was happening on the surface. Do we see the hand of God below the events of our lives each week? Do you, as you look back on last week? Perhaps some disappointment—God's purpose. Perhaps some joy—God's encouragement. Don't be a Michal—seeing only the surface, the appearance of life. Look for God in the gospel. As David did.

3. The Joy of David

His attitude can best be described as whole-hearted: *David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets. They brought the ark of the LORD and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the LORD (vv 14-15). After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD Almighty. Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. And all the people went to their homes (vv 17-19).*

And what a comedown, what an anti-climax, his homecoming must have been! *When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, “How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would”* (v 20).

Earlier in the chapter in verses eight and nine, with the death of Uzzah, David had lost face terribly. He had looked a complete fool. But he will not allow that verdict on his dancing now:

David said to Michal, “It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD’s people Israel—I will celebrate before the LORD. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honour” (vv 21-22).

You see Michal’s sarcasm: *“How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would”* (v 20). She said in effect to David “Had you forgotten who you are: that you are the king? Act the part!” But David had replied, “Do you think I was forgetting who I am? I was remembering who I am . . . a redeemed sinner rejoicing at God’s grace”.

For David, joy and humiliation went together. Water only rests when it reaches the lowest point. The human spirit is like that. When I realise that I am more unworthy (because of my sin) than I ever dared to fear, but more loved (by God) than I ever dared to hope, then I find joy—at election, that God has set His love on me, not because I deserve it, which I don’t; but because He loves me out of His grace.

You and I may not be dancers (I am certainly not), but if we are believers, we need to know this joy. If you are not yet a believer, can you conceive of it? It is a joy the world cannot understand and a joy the world cannot grant and a joy the world cannot remove from us, because it is experienced before the Lord:

David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might (v 14). *David said to Michal, “It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD’s people Israel—I will celebrate before the LORD”* (v 21).

In his own eyes David was humiliated: *“I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes”* (v 22). In Michal’s eyes he was despised and scorned. But he put himself in the hands of God, for whatever honour God deemed appropriate: *“But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honour”* (v 22). But Michal’s attitude put herself outside the will of God, so she would never give birth to the heir who might have united the houses of Saul and David, and provided the right successor to the throne. *And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death* (v 23). So with Uzzah, Michal, David and the Ark in mind, we need to learn to rejoice with trembling, in the words of Psalm 2, by listening to God’s word and letting it bring us joy.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)