

Joab – the leader who wouldn't be led

II Samuel 18:6-17

I have a friend who is a paediatric surgeon and who learned his skills from an eminent doctor in a university in the midlands. His mentor had taught dozens of men and women the exacting science of operating on small children and each year made a little speech to his team, “You need all your faculties for this work”, he would say, “A steady hand and a clear mind, as you get older you loose these and you reach the point where you should not continue but hand the job over to younger surgeons”. He then made them promise him faithfully that if they noticed his performance as a surgeon declining they would inform him and he would step back and let them do the delicate stuff.

Each year his trainees would leave having seen his skills grow and strengthen as time went by, but by the time my friend had spent a couple of years with him it was clear that the old boy was loosing his edge and that the team would have to keep the promise he had asked them to make. It was a rough meeting, the senior guy lost his temper, told them that they were all completely mad and probably after his job. He didn't take a blind bit of notice and went on bodging operations for several years.

You may think that you will be a wiser and more reasonable person when you reach old age – you may even be preparing to be open to criticism and receptive to others who tell you it is time to take a back seat. This is unlikely to happen without a fight.

We begin our story in David's later years (**II Samuel 18**) when he and his army commander Joab were getting on a bit. David is king, but he is not in control of his country – Absalom his son has just seized it in a military coup. Joab lead the counter insurgency and David's last instructions to him were that Absalom was not to be harmed. Now Joab was unswervingly loyal to David, but he had absolutely no respect for David's wishes when they conflicted with his own. When he caught up with Absalom he half killed him with three stab wounds to the torso and then got his bodyguard to finish the job.

How did it come to this? What turned two brilliant and promising freedom fighters into a couple of grumpy old men who would not listen to anyone – certainly not each other? This is the story of Joab, the leader who wouldn't be led and of David, the king with a guilty secret.

The poacher turns gamekeeper

After killing Goliath, David found life at King Saul's court increasingly dangerous – the king was jealous and kept trying to kill him, or get him killed. So David ran away and hid in the hills. He was not alone, and before long hundreds of men with a reason to fear the regime joined him in the wilderness – amongst these were Joab and his brothers. They were a tough crew and quickly formed an elite group around David. Then David became king after Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle.

This was a difficult period in Israelite history. Some of the tribal groups in Israel who were suspicious of Judah (David's tribe) and who felt a certain loyalty to the family of Saul were not minded to accept David as their king and so they put forward an alternative candidate, Ishbosheth. Abner, Saul's old army chief, took up the pretender's cause and civil war threatened.

David's policy was to unite the kingdom by being conciliatory, going out of his way to build friendships with the dissenting tribes. Joab's policy was to enhance his personal power and influence by removing any possible rival for the job of leading the army. The result was his murder of Abner on the pretext of avenging his brother's death in battle.

Lying on his death bed, passing on some last minute advice to Solomon, King David would say this:

And there is something else. You know what Joab son of Zeruah did to me when he murdered my two army commanders, Abner son of Ner and Amasa son of Jether. He murdered them during a time of peace as revenge for deaths they had caused in time of war, staining his belt and sandals with innocent blood. Do with him what you think best, but don't let him grow old and go to his grave in peace.

1 Kings 2:5-6

Throughout his life, Joab had put personal advancement and vengeance ahead of the needs of the people of God, David had not the courage to control him (yes, *David* lacked courage in certain circumstances – so do you!) he delegated to his son Solomon the task of dealing with the troublesome Joab¹.

Abner's death cleared the way for the onetime outlaw to become the head of Israel's army; the poacher turned gamekeeper. Joab would never let anyone threaten his hold on this job – when David replaced him the new rival, Amasa son of Jether, was violently killed on his way to take up the post.

The lives of David and Joab were intertwined. As young men they would have struck you as very similar; both were dynamic, courageous and highly focused, working as a team for the security and prosperity of Israel. Yet under the surface they were poles apart; David was driven by a passion for God's honour and the well being of the people of God, Joab was driven by a passion for his own advancement and the well being of Joab.

Leaders in today's church have much to learn from a close look at Joab for his spirit is alive and influencing most of us. This is Dale Ralph Davis in his superb commentary on I and II Samuel:

¹ Vindictive? Read the rest of I Kings 2 – it's pretty chilling stuff. Israel's strongest king had serious weaknesses

“I want to be first in my area of the Christian ghetto, recognised, appreciated, well-received. Under the guise of serving the kingdom I crave all the praise that I can get, even at Jesus’ expense. Joab is not dead... some of us know him all too well.”²

The first communities of Christians had the same problem – even the apostle John was refused entry to one church by some character who “just loved to be first”³. We have the same problem today – if you aspire to leadership your motives will need to be examined and rigorously dealt with. Don’t be fooled by the pious language we have learned to use, we sing that it is all about Jesus, but it probably isn’t. You need to take a long hard look into your soul and find out how much of your motivation is really all about you. Then you need to change your motives so that it really is all about his glory and his kingdom. You will probably have to do this more frequently than you realise and the need to purge your motives will increase with your age.

As a surgeon gets older his hand starts to shake; as a Christian gets older his or her ego starts to re-assert itself; both problems can be fatal.

The same but different

Motive was not the only thing that separated these old fighters, they each had an entirely different approach to making decisions. Listen to the advice Joab occasionally offered David and this becomes clear; where David was usually *principled*, Joab was always a *pragmatist*.⁴

I know a man who works in the entourage of the CEO of a large retail organisation. He has a motto which he never tires of repeating, “When the boss says ‘jump’ I only have one question: how high?” Powerful men and women are in constant danger of surrounding themselves with yes-men who will never challenge or oppose them.

Contrast this with Joab who was not in the least bit cowed by David’s power or position – he could be incredibly frank with the king; in fact he was often well out of line.

First, after he raped his half sister David refuses to allow Absalom back to court. Joab advised the king to allow his son Absalom to return home from exile. Why? He feared that David would be more depressed without Absalom.

Second, when Absalom is killed, David is distraught and the army are hurt that their King is not grateful to them. Joab rebukes him for not congratulating the troops. Good advice but why?

² 2 Samuel – looking on the heart, Dale Ralph Davis, Christian Focus Publications, ISBN 1-85792-335-9 page 41

³ III John 9-10

⁴ Be careful here – very principled people are often block headed and need to learn from pragmatists, it is not always wrong to be realistic! In the same way pragmatist need to listen to those who treasure principle so that they don’t neglect truth and righteousness. Synergy is good – Joab wasn’t much bothered by principle even if David would listen to his realistic approach.

Third, David counts the number of men of military age. Joab says, “Are you sure you want to do this?” Even he knows the Lord will take this as a sign of David’s growing self-reliance and lack of trust.

What drove Joab in these three incidents? Simple; if David falls, Joab falls. David needs Joab to prop up his kingdom and Joab needs David to continue his career. Like two drunks slumped against one another on a park bench they need each other.

This Joab would stop at nothing to keep David’s dynasty going, – where David would usually ask, “Is this *right*”, Joab would ask, “Will this *work*?” – where David might ask, “Is this *wrong*?”, Joab would wonder, “Can we get away with this?” At his very best David was *principled*, but Joab was always *pragmatic* calculating the decisions on what would work, what he thought he could get away with.

Leaders in the modern world are very susceptible to the mindset of Joab, we live in a pragmatic age and we are impatient with principles. When we see things that work we tend to gloss over the principles if they get in the way. We have seen this recently in the way the British government works. During the premierships of both Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher we have gradually become more prime-minister led than cabinet led. Elected ministers have become the junior partners in decision making processes dominated by paid advisors and prime-ministerial favourites. The result is profoundly unsatisfactory and has made us the victims of ill thought out policies developed by a few chums sitting ‘round a sofa. We ought to be getting decisions arrived at by a diverse group of elected ministers sitting ‘round a table with someone taking notes about who said what and why the decision was made. Principles are important – even if they slow things down.

It is the same in the church. Someone has written about America’s Fortune 500 pastors, destined for greatness, these are their qualities:

“Winsome, charismatic, executive-like pastors who exude warmth and success. Known more for their humour than for their spirituality; today’s market-sensitive pastors are relationally savvy...instead of eliciting deep feelings of guilt, as the old revivalists did, these pastors lift the spirit, promote optimism and make people feel good about themselves.”⁵

Joab would have been right at home in these sorts of church, I am not sure that David, or Jesus for that matter, would have felt the same.

The secret of survival

How did Joab get away with it for so long? David must have recognised his lust for power, and resented his growing inability to control him. Why did the king not slap him down, have him arrested, or make him take gardening

⁵ *Selling Jesus: what’s wrong with marketing the church*, Douglas Webster, quoted in Dale Ralph Davis, *ibid* page 152

leave? There is a reason, apart from his impressive ability as a commander Joab knew a thing or two about David.

It was while he was away leading a campaign against the troublesome Ammonites that Joab received a messenger carrying a communiqué from the King. The letter commanded Joab to put the messenger into the thick of a battle against an Ammonite city and then, when the fighting was fiercest, have the men withdraw suddenly leaving the messenger exposed to the enemy and certain to be killed.

Joab did not object, it was business as usual – *the king says jump, I say 'how high.*

The messenger's name was Uriah the Hittite, husband of Bathsheba the beautiful woman the accidental sight of whose naked body had beguiled and seduced David a few months before. She was now carrying the king's child and her husband needed to be eliminated. Joab was expected to arrange this.

How do you respect a king who does this? How do avoid becoming world weary and cynical when 'the Lord's anointed' is capable of this kind of thing? No wonder Joab was prepared to kill to make himself indispensable – no wonder that he became a loose canon.

It was not always like this – before the Bathsheba incident there is a telling glimpse into the heart of a Joab as yet undamaged by the sins of his master. Sent off the fight a huge Ammonite army, Joab arrived to discover that they had been reinforced by Aramean mercenaries. Joab's army was caught in the middle of them and would have to fight in two directions at once. This is what he did:

“When Joab saw that he would have to fight on both the front and the rear, he chose some of Israel's elite troops and placed them under his personal command to fight the Arameans in the fields. He left the rest of the army under the command of his brother Abishai, who was to attack the Ammonites. “If the Arameans are too strong for me, then come over and help me,” Joab told his brother. “And if the Ammonites are too strong for you, I will come and help you. Be courageous! Let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God. May the LORD's will be done.”

II Samuel 10:9-12

He was no plaster saint, but there was the germ of godliness in him and it never got the chance to develop; only a year later Uriah the Hittite turned up with his message from David.

Leaders need to realise that their lapses in behaviour can have huge consequences. They lead to disillusionment, they can change the whole atmosphere in a church, and they can cause people to backslide. The responsibility to walk in holiness and righteousness comes with the territory – if you don't want this then leave!