

The third Sunday after Trinity - St Martha & St Mary's, Leuven  
Mark 4:35-41

How can you hold on to the stones you have discovered in your hand during the Pandemic?

Greta Thunberg is one of my current heroes and I'm sure I'm not alone. 15 year old girl stops going to school to protest climate change. A couple of years later she is addressing the world's most powerful people at the World Economic Forum in Davos and by the time she has reached 18 she seems to have become one of the most important voices in the fight to stop the climate crisis.

A BBC documentary I watched which followed the journey she made in the lead up to the World Economic Forum in 2019 gave a brilliant feel for her personality and character. She is completely without pretence and her slight physical stature makes her look even younger than she is. She seems quite defenceless and you get the feeling she'd much rather be curled up on the sofa watching tv than taking on the world's leaders. There's no sense in looking for her weak spot, for the chink in her armour because what you see is what you get. A teenager who sometimes struggles to find the right words, who is shy and suffers from but who knows that she has a message, a vision that she cannot afford not to share.

The sight of this young girl making her way on to the stage in Davos wearing a pair of jeans, a pale pink hoodie and her trademark plaits was completely inspiring and could not have been in greater contrast to everyone and everything that surrounded her. The lights, the cameras, the security barriers, the armed guards, the hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on protecting and securing the world's most powerful people. It was all made to look a bit ridiculous in the face of the simple yet powerful words that came out of the mouth of this 17 year old. As Greta spoke out it felt as if a conference hall worth of Goliaths were being struck down.

We love Greta because she's another David. And we love feeling like David. Think of the number of box office hit movies that tell the story of the small, weak person taking on the giant and defeating him Erin Brockovich and her fight against the Pacific Gas and Electric Company comes to mind.

Nearly all of us love feeling like David. Most of us identify with David. Small town boy who uses his own resourcefulness, his five smooth stones, to beat the Giant The big, awkward, encumbered Goliath who can barely move for all the armour he has built up around himself is so unappealing.

But the complexity of the David and Goliath story is that despite our affinity with David, we spend so much time and energy being like Goliath. Covering our lives with all the protection and security and armour we can find - be that in our homes, our workspaces, our cars, our devices, more and more stuff to help us feel more in control, more powerful. Even though in our heads we continue to identify with David.

We like the idea of being David - nimble, courageous and straight forward - but we surround ourselves with the trappings of Goliath. Our Facebook selves do not portray us as Davids, but far more as Goliaths. We like David but we are also impressed with someone who has made it on to the list of the nation's ten most influential people. We are seduced by power and strength whilst still telling ourselves that we're like David.

I think the experience of the past year could be highlighting the ineffectiveness of our Goliath efforts. We have been forced to admit that the security and protection and seeming power that accompanies feeling safe didn't really cut it. It couldn't save us from the virus.

Covid-19 has shone a light on the fact that there are some things from which the most expensive high tech armour in the world cannot protect us. As so many people have said, the virus doesn't differentiate. It has targeted both Goliaths and Davids. The virus has not been put off by people who had all the visible signs of power and influence. Everyone was a target.

But as we have been forced to retreat into our homes and put down half the weapons we can't really use at the moment we've been given an opportunity to draw on our own resources. This pandemic has invited us to look again at our own resources - our five stones - that will help us cope (and win).

In many ways this hellish year we've had has forced us to turn inwards, to look at the resources God has given us for coping when the going gets tough and it feels like the giants might beat us. Some of us have taken up new hobbies, some have started sending greeting cards by post for the first time in years, others found that the long evenings stuck at home gave them time to have proper conversations on the phone, families have started actually spending time together - with mixed success(!), others have discovered the enjoyment of their own company. Several of us have experienced re-connecting with nature, of the joy of going for a walk with someone, or taking exercise outside rather than encumbered by machines and devices in a gym.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying it's been a bed of roses, but I do think this year has called into question all the efforts we seem to go to in building up layers of material protection and security, which when push comes to shove haven't really helped us.

People's experiences of the pandemic have been very different and more or less challenging for many reasons, but I do think we have all been forced to consider what we have at our finger tips when we're free of the armour with which we usually equip ourselves. When we put down the armour, what are the resources that God has given us that show us that with God we have enough?

For those who attended the picnic yesterday, I had a real sense of that in our morning conversations. As we shared the highs and lows of our Christian walk, the times when God has been more or less present and as we discussed current challenges we are each facing, my sense was that the things that have helped us keep going in those difficult times were not the shields of Goliath, but the gifts and relationships that God has given us. Whatever we may have turned to, Covid has forced us to look at the resources we each have in our hands, at the stones we hold that can see us through the toughest of challenges.

The great tragedy of the David defeats Goliath story is that David shows characteristics of Goliath. David, the resourceful, nimble shepherd boy who achieved what he needed to achieve with the gifts God had given him behaves like Goliath. David becomes another person encumbered by his own heavy shiny armour, weighed down by ambition, restless with a sense of needing, wanting more, paranoid, greedy, narcissistic. The David of the 'little guy overcomes the big bad guy story', fails to trust that what God has given him is enough, he tosses his five stones aside and turns into the very person he sleighed as a young boy.

The Bible is not a book full of examples of perfect people who show us how to live the good Christian life. Because the Bible is not an instruction manual. The Bible is a book of stories of humanity, of flawed people like you and me, who start out right and then take a wrong turn, of people who God trusts and who let God down. Of people who love the idea of being like David the shepherd boy, but are too quickly seduced to wanting to be King. And through their stories they hold up a mirror for us and have much to teach us. Though their stories we see the power of God's redeeming love.

As we begin our latest attempt to emerge out of lockdown and with the numbers of people being vaccinated we can have more hope than before that our freedom might last a bit longer, people are asking when things will go back to normal, when will things be exactly the way they were before.

But surely that's not what we want? Karen sent the PCC a very interesting podcast about post covid life and not just going back to the way things were before. It made me hope that before we

rush back to the way things were before and once again to piling on the security and protection and riches that make us feel safe, we will take a moment to look at the stones we've had in our pocket throughout the pandemic.

Turn them over one by one, look at the resources you've discovered on your person in the last 18 months and consider how you can continue to use them to help you avoid turning into yet another Goliath.