

THE STORY OF TAMAR AND HOPE

Daniela Gennrich - 10th August 2003

2 Samuel 13; Mark 5 24a - 34

How many people sitting in church this morning have ever before heard the OT passage we read this morning before? - The one about the violent rape of Tamar, David's daughter, and all the violence that follows from this?

There are some texts in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, that are just never read publicly! The passage from 2Sam 13 is one of them. Gerald West calls such texts that the church really doesn't know what to do with, "Texts of Terror!" In fact, I was quite surprised to see that it was set for Morning Prayer today – and so asked if it might be put into the Eucharist readings for today.

It reads rather like a modern day newspaper article!

In fact, almost every day when I open up the Natal Witness, or any other newspaper, there is at least one story of a rape or some other form of violence like it: child abuse, domestic violence, sodomy of young boys or men. Yes, there are thousands of Tamar's in South Africa today. And of course there must be many Ammons, and also Absaloms. 'What is the world coming to?' we have often asked...

According to statistics, half of all women in SA – (yes, that's you and me, sisters and mothers!!) have been or will be sexually abused in their lifetime! One woman is apparently raped on average every 17 seconds!! That means a lot of desolation is being caused even in the few minutes I am speaking to you.

And worse, over 40% of all rape cases reported in SA involve children under 12! Most of these rapes take place within the home, by men these girls or women know and trust. We could go on....

What is so surprising to many who read this text for the first time, is that rape is not just a function of our degraded world that has turned away from God! It took place in the home of God's specially chosen king of Israel – 400 yrs ago! Rape is probably as old as humanity itself.

Why, then, is the church so quiet about it? There are many theories about this, and I won't get into that now.

Let's rather get into the text itself. In fact, I will use both the Old Testament and the Gospel passage today.

2 Samuel chapter 13 is a story about rape, a story about incest, about a woman who is not safe in her own home.

It is about a young woman (we don't know her age but we know she is a virgin) called Tamar, who is actually King David's daughter. Her brother Amnon decides he is in love with his ½ sister, although it is more likely to be nothing more than lust. Amnon

is miserable, and his good friend Jonadab, convinces him that as the king's son he should not have to do without what he wants. So Amnon takes his friend's bad advice and decides to trick his sister into his bedroom by pretending he is ill and asking King David to get her to come and prepare food for him. She does as she is told, and in trust goes to his room to prepare food. He betrays her trust and lures her up to his bed, claiming to be terribly ill. When he grabs her and demands sex, she – unlike most women of her time- actually argues with him and tells him it would be a disgrace. She even offers to marry him, to save both their dignity. She is fully aware that as a 'defiled' woman she will never find a husband and always be a social outcast. And for a king's daughter, what a disgrace!

Verse 14 makes me shudder: .. “and because he was stronger than she, he raped her”.

The result? That short incident of lust and loss of control leads to a long story of violence, hatred and murder. What started out as a filthy fantasy of one young man ends up not only destroying the life of his own sister, but it destroys his family, and even threatens to split his father's kingdom in two – it destabilizes the whole society.

In terms of immediate results:

Amnon's so-called love quickly turns to hatred after the rape, and he has Tamar turned out of his room. Virgins in the king's court wore special colourful garments. Tamar is so desperate that she tears her robe and sobs aloud in her agony and shame. Her brother Absalom sees what she has done and guesses what happened. But instead of listening to her and helping her deal with her trauma, he tells her to keep quiet about it. (Isn't that a familiar story? So many girls and women are told to be quiet because of the shame that this would bring on the family.) But he does have the decency to take her into his house and looks after her – knowing that all her chances of ever finding a husband are now over. And he later even calls his daughter Tamar, after her.

And Tamar? She is dispensed with in this story with the short verse (20):

“And Tamar lived in her brother's house, a desolate woman”. We hear nothing more about her. But I am haunted by this short verse. In ancient Israel, women were believed not to have souls in their own right (seen more like the way many people see dogs in today's society – although some, like me, would disagree with that too!). They were taught that they would be saved through child birth and through faithfully serving their husbands. They were regarded as their father's property, and then later their husband's property, and had no property of their own. It stands to reason, therefore, that women who did not marry for whatever reason were seen as outcasts, misfits, and most were very very poor indeed. And an unmarried woman who was not a virgin, unless a widow, was ritually unclean – so a raped ex-virgin would have the same status as a prostitute – and thus an outcast – someone to steer clear of for fear of defilement.

Can you imagine her loneliness and her depression?

But the story doesn't end there, although we hear nothing more of Tamar. We hear about how Absalom is enraged but doesn't deal with his anger, until 2 years later he kills his own ½ brother, and then runs away from home, and later leads a rebellion

against his father's rule as king. The noble king, chosen by God for his wisdom and faithfulness, refuses to deal with Amnon when he hears about the rape, "because Amnon was his favourite son"! David's refusal to deal with the abuse going on in his own home almost leads to his downfall.

It reminds one of the Catholic Church's refusal to deal with the sexual abuse cases over the past few years, and instead tries to cover its tracks – pretend nothing is happening, just like David and his family – while the victim, Tamar, is left to live a desolate life in loneliness and rejection.

What I find very powerful in this story is how many men it takes to rape a woman, as Gerald West says. Each of the men in the story has some role to play in the rape and destruction of this beautiful woman. Amnon of course is the main perpetrator. But without his friend Jonadab's influence he might not have had the audacity to even think of such a devious plan. And Jonadab made Amnon feel he ought to prove that he was the king's son by getting what he wanted – sound familiar? As a real man, or as the head of the house, or whatever, - you shouldn't be limited by this woman...! Jonadab was really bad news, actually – later we see that he deepens the rift between David and Absalom – I wonder if he enjoyed witnessing all the destruction he had caused?? Reminds one of Stefano in 'Days of our Lives' or one of the other baddies in the very bad soapies we subjected to on TV!!

And what about Absalom, who apparently felt a lot of pain about what had happened to his sister, and in one way he was loyal to her and protected her as best he knew. But, as one of the PACSA youth said in a dramatic representation of Tamar: "What use is Amnon's death to me? My life is over anyway. Couldn't you rather comfort me and let me talk about my pain?" No – it is often said that men cannot express their feelings – many boys grow up being told they should not cry. Well –in Absalom's case the result of keeping it all in for 2 years is that he also becomes a criminal – a murderer and a traitor. And is useless to his sister, going off on wild schemes to destroy their dad...

And David? How many fathers minimize their daughter's humiliation and suffering because of some 'higher' imperative – such as the family reputation, or not wanting to be a bad neighbour – or because he is my favourite son? And this God's chosen as King of Israel!

So when looking at how many men are involved in this rape story, Gerald West has to consider that often men are complicit in such things. He sums up the impact and relevance of this story very nicely when he says:

"This story, we know, is repeated every hour [every half a minute!] of every day in our country. Many of the women in our churches – perhaps even in this church – have been sexually abused."

It seems such a negative, miserable and depressing tale, that it really made me ask – as do so many women who are abused: "Where is God in this story?" I am afraid the news here is not good. God seems utterly absent and silent.

However, just knowing that this story is in the Bible, that it is acknowledged in the Bible that rape is a terrible sin, that Tamar was so completely innocent, yes, and even strong in trying to stop it, can encourage those amongst us, women or even men, who may have been abused in our lives. We are not alone

Whew! You are probably by now so miserable and exhausted by all the pain and hopelessness in this story!! You may have found yourself even thinking – why is this woman telling us all this bad news this morning? I didn't come here for this, I get enough of this in the daily news, thank you very much!!

When I read this story for the first time, I also found it really depressing, and deeply disturbing, and I remember asking God - where are you? What do you say about this kind of thing? Together with the Psalmist in the psalm we read just now, we are prompted to ask:

Vs 7 and 8: “Answer me quickly, O Lord;

My spirit fails.

Do not hide your face from me...

...and

Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love

For I have put my trust in you.”

I am happy to say that God has answered this prayer - in Jesus. The person of Jesus, who was often criticised for the way he related to women, as equals, thereby ‘bringing shame on himself as a Jewish man!’ Let us now turn to the Good News of Jesus Christ, truly the Saviour and Healer of both men and women, by turning to the Gospel passage.

It is a familiar story, and one read more often than 2 Samuel 13. And yet, it is also unconventional, as it also talks about a taboo subject: menstruation! Sorry guys/gentlemen – but it is Woman's Day weekend, so I have been given permission to talk about such things today!! But let's not be put off – let's explore this story a bit more deeply.

This woman – we don't know her name, but to me she could be called ZULU FOR COURAGE

She has been a social outcast for 12 years – also ritually unclean, and like Tamar, her isolation and the desolation and loneliness that resulted from it are as a result of her vulnerability as a woman, and the way a male dominated society has chosen to define her as a result. Perhaps we could see ****'s hemorrhaging – ongoing internal bleeding as a symbol for the kind of pain Tamar must have experienced all the rest of the years of her life.

This incredible woman does the unthinkable – in fact a whole lot of unthinkable things – in her desire her desperate longing to be touched by God –

1. She joins a crowd, which means that she is touching lots of people who are pressing around her – thus making all those she touches ritually unclean!! Heaven forbid!!
2. But it gets worse – she actually goes up to a Rabbi – although admittedly he’s an unconventional one by all accounts – and touches his robe!!! Imagine – she has the cheek to make him unclean!!
3. As if that’s not bad enough – When he asks who touched him, she actually comes forward and admits it!!!
4. Not only does she admit it, but she actually tells her whole shameful and disgusting story (remember menstruation and bleeding are taboo and thus NEVER mentioned publicly – and women who were menstruating weren’t allowed to go out in public, or even prepare food – for fear of passing on some dreaded thing this way!!) in public

This woman has risked even the last dregs of her self-respect here!!

But even more interesting is Jesus’ response.

1. Even though there is a huge crowd pressing around him all the time (worse than the Royal Show on the last Sunday, I would think!!) – He notices something has happened power has gone out of him– and its registered deep within Him.
2. He asks, quite understandably, who it was who touched Him. When at first no one comes forward and admits it, He keeps on trying to find the person. He’s not going to let it go.
3. But what is interesting here is not only what He does, but what He doesn’t do:
 - Firstly, When she does come forward, He lets her tell her story - He actually talks in public to a woman, instead of just sending her away;
 - Second, He should rush off quickly to the temple and go through the required cleansing ritual, but He doesn’t. He actually engages her in a conversation.
1. The next most amazing thing He does is that He breaks all the norms of the day, the norms which say that a woman is only saved through child bearing and through faithfully serving her husband. He tells her that HER FAITH – (not the faith of the Head of her Household, and He doesn’t inquire about her marital status or whether she has managed to have children before her bleeding) – Her Faith has made her well – has brought her the healing she so desperately wanted.
2. He invites her to go in peace – maybe almost as a way of telling the crowd to back off from her too – and He reassures her that she will be free of her

suffering – and I believe that it is not just her physical suffering – but her emotional and psychological suffering. Because Jesus has accepted her and affirmed her value in the sight of God – others can no longer make her an outcast – if He calls her His daughter – her family must surely accept her back??

Another interesting thing is that when she feels healing deep inside of her, so does He – somehow they communicate at a very deep level. It's almost as if He reaches deep inside her and meets her at her point of need.

This man Jesus was not intimidated by anything! He reached out to someone considered worthless and gave her back her self-worth in public.

What about the woman? Did she just quietly run away? No – she took an active part in her own healing by using the space created by Jesus to TELL her whole awful, shameful and painful story – in public!! And so Jesus had given her a space to participate in her own healing. Unlike Tamar, she gets her chance to talk out her story – and by taking the risk to tell Jesus everything, she is able to face it all, and so receive healing.

I believe that if Jesus had been there in Tamar's day – He would have given her this same chance. He would have allowed her deep inner wound to heal simply by her coming near to Him. He would have looked her in the eyes with an expression of love and compassion, and He would have listened carefully to what she needed to tell Him. And He would have honoured her for her courage, and He would have brought her the healing – both deep within herself, and in the eyes of society, that she so badly needed.

This is the Good News. This is why Jesus is the only true way to our salvation – whether we are women or men, boys or girls. It is not because of a doctrine of salvation or redemption, but because of who Jesus is and His love and depth on connection each of us, where we are, here and now.

In my experience there are very few people in this world, men or women, rich or poor, young or old, who have never experienced some kind of deep shame or loneliness, some kind of desolation– some deep wound that we have carefully hidden away for fear of it becoming exposed. It may be something terrible we did once, long ago. Or it might be something that happened to us, as a child, or even as a grown up – a grief, a failure, a disgrace – a pain too hard to bear – too hard to even talk about, that we have successfully buried somewhere deep inside. And, now that we think about it, it is actually festering, like that hemorrhage experienced by the woman in the Gospel. Maybe we have been going to all sorts of doctors/ healers, or found some other way of trying to wish it away – but it cannot be healed.

This Gospel story challenges us – all those who have a place of desolation buried within us - to draw near to the real person of Jesus, who is present even here today – and to have the courage to reach out and touch the robe of this incredible man, this loving, compassionate God, who longs to feel His power going out into us - and to heal us deep inside, where we need it most.

As we close now and go into the prayer time, let us stay in the Presence of our Healer Jesus, and 'tell him our whole story' as Tamar so badly needed to and as the bleeding woman had the chance to do. And I pray that either now, later when you are ready, you will hear Him say: "My daughter, My son, go in peace, your faith has made you well".

Amen.