

A sermon given on 23rd June 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: 1 Samuel 17 (abridged)

(Proper 7, Lectionary Year B)

Introduction: Mr Bates versus the Post Office

In October 2003 a letter was published in a local newspaper about the injustice suffered by a sub-postmaster, Alan Bates, whose contract had been terminated by the Post Office. Alan Bates set up a website which attracted other subpostmasters who had been accused false accounting as a result of errors in the Post Office's Horizon software. It wasn't until 2019 that they won a court case against the Post Office, and even then the compensation, after legal expenses, was not adequate to cover the terrible suffering experienced by many subpostmasters who had been falsely accused, lost their jobs and even gone to prison.

Following an independent enquiry set up by the Government and the showing of the four-part TV series *Mr Bates versus the Post Office*, more compensation has been promised by the Government.

Alan Bates is a classic example of what has become known as a David and Goliath situation – a small, seemingly powerless person against a big, powerful opponent. Alan Bates finally won, and so did David. We also face challenges in our lives as individuals and as a church, and there are plenty of situations

in the world that have parallels with these stories. Let's see what we can learn from the story of David and Goliath.

The challenge

The Philistines were a nation who lived in what we now call the Gaza strip, in an alliance of five city-states, one of which was the city of Gaza itself. At the time Saul was anointed as Israel's first king, the Philistines were a powerful military force who were oppressing Israel. They had established garrisons of soldiers within Israel. Saul's first job as king was to drive the Philistines out of his territory.

The Philistines' champion, Goliath, represented everything that they appeared to be to the Israelite army – a challenge that was too big to overcome. They felt weak and helpless. No one was willing to take up his challenge and go and fight him.

There are plenty of challenges in the world today that seem too big to overcome. There are bullies like Goliath and the Philistines in many workplaces, in schools, in families..

One of the big challenges facing our society at the moment is transgender ideology in schools. Some schools are teaching children that you can choose your gender, and affirming the belief of some vulnerable children that they are in the wrong body. This misguided ideology has now become so embedded in our society that psychologists who see the harm of such an approach are afraid to speak out in case they lose their jobs. Gender dysphoria is a complex and distressing condition, and those who suffer need compassion and appropriate help. But that is a very different approach from denying the reality of biological sex, or leading children along a path that leads to

life-changing and irreversible physical and psychological damage.

Another big challenge, which we are becoming increasingly aware of, is domestic abuse. It can seem impossible for the victim to challenge the behaviour, or leave the relationship. Friends and neighbours may be reluctant to intervene.

Bullying in the workplace is another area. People recognise that there's a problem, but it seems no one wants to stick their neck out and call out the bad behaviour, make a complaint, or call in the union. It can seem much easier to keep quiet, and avoid rocking the boat. Or just to leave and find another job.

The Champion

When David arrived at the Israelite camp, he heard Goliath's boasting and he also heard that King Sauyl was looking for a champion, and offering a reward for whoever killed Goliath. David was outraged at the audacity of the Philistine to insult God and his people, and also surprised that no one was willing to stand up to him.

On the face of it, David seemed an unlikely contender for the role of giant-slaying. He was young, and not a trained soldier. But he was not unaccustomed to facing danger. As a shepherd, he'd learned to defend his sheep from wild animals, and had perfected his slingshot technique. He'd fought off bears and lions. And more importantly, he'd developed a relationship with God, and come to trust God to help him in times of adversity. The beautiful 23rd psalm is testimony to how David had come to see God in the image of a shepherd, who would provide for him and protect him.

So now as David prepares to face Goliath, he is drawing on his past experiences of facing challenges, using his skills and trusting God to help him.

Just as Saul was looking for a champion to face Goliath, God is also looking today for those who will champion the cause of right and justice, who will stand up for the oppressed and downtrodden, who are willing to be used by him in the purposes of his kingdom.

God needs people who will make a difference, who will ask the questions, who will put themselves forward to help. He needs people who are willing to stand up for truth and justice, to speak the truth that needs to be articulated, even if others are unwilling to hear it. He needs people to champion the cause of the forgotten, the marginalised, the powerless.

Are we like the Israelite army, feeling powerless and helpless? Are we afraid to do something, do we give up and think nothing can be done, do we leave it to others? Or like David, who trusted in the Lord?

Just like David, we have skills and experience to draw on, even if they don't exactly fit the new situation. We also, most importantly, have God with us. David's time working as a shepherd enabled him to develop a relationship with God. Are we developing our relationship with God day by day, so that when we need his help we can be confident that he will be there for us?

David used his experience and skill with his stones and sling to defeat Goliath, but ultimately his victory was due to trusting God – “the Battle is the Lord's”.