



## **Who is Mephibosheth? Stories of Grace by Warwick Bell**

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Of the questions I asked you this morning, the one to which there were the most affirmative replies, was “Who likes stories? We hear stories from our earliest days. Most of us like reading them to children and their interest is so clear.

I can remember, as an English teacher, how much even my older students liked to be read a really good story. And I liked reading to them, or reading the start of a story and then getting the students to write an ending to it.

Many of the stories, that young children like, come to us from the earliest times. And the stories that are especially popular with the young are those with good and positive endings - even if there were sad or trying times on the way.

We listened to two stories a moment ago. If you had not heard of Mephibosheth before, you have heard of him now. An obscure name? When you come to think of it, the old Testament is full of obscure names, isn't it. To be sure there are the famous ones like Abraham, Moses, Jacob and the like. But think of Naphthali, Elizaphan, Ham, Ashur, Jehoshaphat.....

And then there is Mephibosheth. I wonder how many could have told us much about him before hearing our reading from the book of Samuel this morning.

It really wouldn't be any wonder, would it? For Mephibosheth seems of so little importance – the last survivor of King David's enemies – a young crippled boy - dropped by his caregiver as a baby - who was no threat to that great leader David whatsoever.

In fact, it is a wonder that Mephibosheth even survived a long enough to get his name in the Bible. His grandfather, the jealous King Saul who tried on many occasions to kill David, had himself been killed, and in the bitter Civil War that followed between David's forces and those loyal to Saul, the remnant of Saul's forces had finally been defeated. Saul's descendants had been killed and David have been made king of Israel as well as of Judah. David had then fought and defeated the Philistine armies and had gained firm control of his people. He was now the victor ruler of all Israel - and David looked around and asked the question: Are there any of Saul's descendants left?

Have you ever seen real fear in someone's eyes? Have you ever felt real fear yourself?

Well that is what Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan, grandson of Saul felt as he was located there at the house of Machir, son of Ammiel in Lodebar – fear that he, the last survivor of Saul, was about to die – so no one could threaten the reign of David and the stability of the newly reunited nation.

When the boy said to the questioning King that he was no better than a dead dog, he really meant it. His life was at an all-time low.

But Mephibosheth, as the story shows, had got it all wrong. Certainly, he was weak, of little worth, vulnerable as his handicap showed – but the king didn't care about that although he could have destroyed him then and there for who and what he was, the king sought him out, not for that purpose at all, but to show him kindness, to show him loyalty, to show him incredible generosity – not for anything he himself had done – **no** – but because of a promise David had made in days long past to Mephibosheth's father Jonathan.

It was great that the king gave him back all the lands that had belonged to Saul and his family – that was superb generosity from a victorious king, but the story doesn't end there. For him he went much further.

He took him into his own house – to eat at the king's table – to be in effect one of the king's own family for the rest of his days.

I am sure you have noticed how important stories are in conveying great truths. People find explanations and theories hard, but like we saw before, people love stories. The Bible is full of them. Jesus used them in his parables.

And I believe that that is why the story of Mephibosheth is there in the Old Testament at all.

You see it isn't a great story in the history of Israel. Perhaps it is an interesting facet of the extraordinary diverse life of the great King David – but what it is most of all is a vital insight into the faith of a people.

For here we see encapsulated in a real economy of words, a brilliant picture of the Grace of God – something we talk about in theological terms - but here it is through an illustration from real life that we all understand – the king who stretched out his hands to the completely worthless one and raised him without any merit on his part - to the status of the very son of the King. His intention - to keep and protect him and love him all his days.

Perhaps you know a story like this that Jesus himself used to show his followers, and ultimately us down the ages - a vital insight into the nature of God. Like the story of Mephibosheth, we need to get behind the 'superficial' nature of the story – into the 'heavenly meaning' of the earthly story – the parable.

The story of the prodigal son, the lost son as he has called in modern translation – the story we had read to us this morning. It is the story of a young man who deliberately took steps that led him to the very depths. A young man who was not just a wayward youth, going through the stereotypical adolescent rebellion. When he demanded that his father give him his share of the property – his inheritance – it was not like asking for a loan for an overseas trip – it was like robbing his father of life. It is the kind of thing that happens when a person dies.

The demanding of his share of the property like this would mean that he regarded the father as dead. It was absolute rejection of his father – and all that he stood for. There was no turning back.

And it is not as if the son did anything useful with his inheritance – he squandered it – he wasted it. The ‘reckless living’ of the Good News version, the ‘riotous living’ of the Authorised Version cover, in effect, a multitude of sin.

Then he had nothing left. There was a famine. There was nothing to spend. There was nothing to eat. The only job he could get was in the fields, feeding scraps to the pigs.

So he really had gone about as low as he could go. Living in the fields with animals the Jews regarded as forbidden - unclean – you couldn’t get much lower than that. And he would have been pleased to eat the food that the pigs ate– but no one gave him anything.

Do you know that one of the plays I studied with my students was Shakespeare’s Macbeth. Macbeth, the man, embarks on a course of wrongdoing when he murders the King Duncan, an evil decision that leads him further and further into the mire. He kills to gain advantage, and then he has to kill again and again to keep his advantage. Finally, he is in so deep that he finds it impossible to turn back: “I am in blood step’d in so far That turning were as tedious as to go o’er”

But somehow the Prodigal son was different from this. Something about his early upbringing must have left a spark in him, for he came to his senses. He knew what he had done was wrong. He thought there might be something he could do that will be better than this fate. Why, even his father had hired workers who are much better off than he. Maybe he could beg to become one of them. Maybe his father would not be so disillusioned with him that he would deny him a job as a menial worker. So, aware of his own unworthiness, he turned back homewards, daring to hope – just for a servant’s job.

Do you realise that he didn’t even get to speak to his father to apologise, to beg, to crawl as the idiom is today. No. His father saw him when he was still a long way away. Did the father close the door? Did he deliver a lecture? Did he reluctantly offer a job? [Show Rembrandt painting here]

No. The father’s reaction at seeing his son in the distance - turned and approaching him was to feel pity – to run to greet him – throw his arms around him – to kiss him – to put the finest clothes on him (he didn’t even wash off the smell of the pigs). He put a ring on his finger. He put shoes on his feet – and called for a great celebration – a great feast – to kill the prized calf they had been raising. These were things done only for the greatest honoured person and at the greatest family celebrations (like a wedding) And his table was laden.

When Alison and I were able to visit Saint Petersburg in Russia, one of the most memorable things we saw in that largely restored city was Rembrandt’s painting in the Hermitage Museum. No wonder it was the focus of crowds of visitors as they marvelled at his depiction of the father’s love.

‘For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive. He was lost, but now has been found.’

Isn’t this New Testament account a tremendous story!

Aren’t there such a lot parallels with the old Testament story of Mephibosheth?

Isn't it tremendous how these brief stories from the Bible have in them profound truths and speak more eloquently than ever any books or sermons could, no matter how deep their scholarship or great their length, can do.

And I don't need to labour these points this morning. For they show us clearly the Grace of God.— a God who reaches out to us no matter who we are or what we have done.

Despite our own weaknesses and imperfections, a Grace which is sufficient for all our needs

- a God who loves us for what we are
- a God who is waiting there – coming to meet us with open arms
- who wants the very best for us – to raise us up
- to make us the people he meant us to be.

Terms we use – the Glory of God, the Grace of God – they are really beyond our human comprehension. Yet it is in the Bible's stories like this that we gain an insight into what God is like. We are given imagery, a picture of the nature of God.

An image that I find particularly meaningful is the way in which in both stories the undeserving person is taken to dine at the king's/father's table. The picture that we have here is one of total acceptance into the family – with all the connotations that this has of forgiveness, love, acceptance and joy.

But it is not just in stories and pictures and images that we can see the grace of God. We can see it in others too. We have just last week been able to reflect on the life, faith and example of our late Queen Elizabeth II.

And we can see the grace of God vitally in the fellowship of His people. 'You are the body of Christ,' it says in the Bible. The testimony of people right here in Saint Heliers will answer the question, Who is Mephibosheth?

As Chris Barnard spoke to us here just a couple of weeks ago. You have your own stories. If you have been there, you have this in your story. Those who through the Grace of God have been rescued in the great rescue mission of Christ.

When Alison and I joined this congregation last year, we experienced the Grace of God in the fellowship of the people here. Neither of us was particularly well, and we were, like all areas, in the midst of the Covid crisis – but we experienced warmth, Christian welcome and acceptance, hospitality and some new friendships - especially the positivity that has made us part of what was for us a new church.

As we look towards finding a new minister for our church here at St Heliers, may the Holy Spirit continue to work through the lives and the stories of our congregation to extend God's Grace and love to a needy world.

-Warwick Bell