

1 Samuel 17:32-49

Taking the initiative

Jumping the gun

There are so many different ways of dividing the world into two – among them those who look upon the glass as half empty and those who see it as half full; those who sit at a keyboard and hover with their finger over a key (hesitantly) and say (very tentatively) “I wonder what will happen if I press this key?” (almost certainly conveying the impression that they have no intention of finding out) and those who do the same (though with much more confidence) “I wonder what will happen if I press this key!” leaving no one in any doubt that they are going to press it and find out! Of course, the latter might discover that all sorts of dire consequences occur! But on the other hand, the former might lose out on learning some key skills. In life, the consequences can be more serious than the results of pressing or not pressing a key on a computer keyboard. Most of us will have experienced times when we were unsure about something, would we? wouldn't we? speak up, act or wait? Almost certainly, we will not have got those decisions entirely right. We may have jumped in with two feet when we would have done well to wait; on the other hand, perhaps we regret NOT speaking up, NOT acting more decisively. Of course, some of us are more inclined to act, whereas others of us are more inclined to wait and carefully consider. I suspect that the world needs both traits and even that we each need both! I realise that that isn't particularly helpful if you are facing a big decision – but it is the truth. We need to be open to carefully consider and to take time for considered reflection (including weighing up the factors, taking advice from trusted friends and seeking God's guidance and prayer) but equally, there will be times when we have to grasp the nettle and get on with things – sometimes we come to a point where the right thing to do it to “go for it”! Do we know for certain? Yes, sometimes our conviction that a particular course of action is the right one for us at a particular time is so strong that we can reply, truthfully, yes, I am certain! Many more times our sense of certainty will be on a spectrum of confidence – and that, my friends, is where faith comes in. Faith, that is based on an assessment of the facts, the factors available to us, the pros and cons, our gut feeling, the guidance and advice of friends, the steer from prayer and scripture – all of that and more – but out of that we need to decide what to do, what steps to take and when – faith is acting in line with what we believe is right in God's eyes as well as our own. If we do that, we can be sure that God will honour our decision even if things don't turn out exactly as we hoped.

One word of warning – my experience is that there is a predisposition in the Scottish psyche against making too bold a decision. We don't like people to jump the gun – especially if it might be seen as pushing yourself to the fore. And so, beware of too much holding back. I'm not quite sure why this is – because let's face it, historically, there have been Scottish inventors, explorers and entrepreneurs aplenty who have stepped out and gone for it, and, as a result, given the world huge benefits.

Jumping the gun or taking the initiative

How would you have viewed David's intervention? Visiting his older brothers who were with Saul's armies, ranged against the Philistine enemies, David is affronted by the challenge from the enemy to fight their champion Goliath and by the seeming reluctance on any of the Israelites to go out to fight him. Would you have seen his offer to go out and fight as jumping the gun or taking the initiative? Was this unthinking bravado or faith in God? His older brothers were quite clear – this was sheer stupidity on David's part. It simply did not make sense – not only was it practically suicidal disregard of his own skin, but his defeat would almost certainly have given the enemy armies confidence to overrun the Israelites. And, yet Saul sees that there is more to David than met the eye. While not having direct military experience, David points to what experience he has had, including strength, ingenuity and courage he'd needed while protecting his father's flocks from wild animals. I'll be honest – had I been among the Israelite army at the time, I would almost certainly have regarded David as an upstart who was needlessly putting himself in danger and likely undermining the fortunes of his brothers and their comrades. But therein lies the rub – we sometimes make the wrong call because we are apt to be blinkered to fresh approaches. Clearly, even Saul assumed that David, if he were to be Israel's champion, would be fitted out with heavy armour to go out against a heavily armoured Goliath. But it soon became apparent that that simply could not be. David couldn't move with the heavy armour, far less fight. Instead, he wanted to be free to move swiftly and deftly – speed and manoeuvrability were to give him the edge over his lumbering opponent – plus it played to David's experience. David didn't beat Goliath through pure fluke – he won because he thought outside the box and, in faith, took the initiative. Yes, God was with him as he had been in his tricky encounters with wild animals in the past, but his victory for God came through him utilising his gifts and experience and not being constrained to act conventionally. Had David been compelled to wear armour and fight the Philistine champion conventionally – in hand to hand combat he wouldn't have had a hope. But he knew his strengths and used them – and used the element of surprise too.

Perhaps there is sometimes a fine line between jumping the gun and taking the initiative – but it is one that we need to cross sometimes if we are going to advance the cause of the kingdom. Playing safe doesn't always achieve what is necessary in God's scheme of things. On the other hand, being overly self confident rather than putting our trust in GOD isn't likely to achieve much either. Perhaps there is an underlying concern among many of us that we don't want to do the WRONG thing. And yes, it is sometimes easier to point the finger at someone who has done something wrong, rather than at someone who has failed to do something. And yet, in modern times there are numerous instances of utter disaster occurring through the failure to prevent tragedy – health and safety failings – where, if any one of a number of people had been just a bit more careful in acting to implement a safety precaution many lives might have been saved. Sometimes “doing nothing” is not an option. No, I wouldn't have been rushing to fight Goliath, but I would like to think that I am not going to be sitting on my hands when God is calling me to get up and work with him to further his purposes. And yes, surprising though it might seem, God will sometimes

come to you and to me and call us to take the initiative for him. It probably won't result in world shattering outcomes but it might be life changing for the one individual whom we spoke to and who was encouraged to think things through and change the direction their life was taking; or for the family who were encouraged by your interest in them to make them feel loved and valued; or the group who were stimulated to embark on a project that had ramifications for the community. We need to get away from doing down folk who take the initiative; we need to believe in ourselves and in God, that he does call and equip each of us to play a part in his grand scheme of things – even if our part right now seems tiny – nothing we do for God is innocuous or irrelevant. And, as the saying goes, “great oaks from little acorns grow”. Let's not despise the small things, nor OUR part in God's scheme of things!

Doing right is not the same as getting it right

As I have suggested, sometimes we are reluctant to act for fear of getting it wrong. But sometimes we need to act, and for the best of reasons, without the guarantee of getting it right. David didn't always get it right (as we will see in the weeks to come, as we go through his long story), but there are definitely times when his interventions were key to fortunes of his people including with respect to God. We just don't know what how our actions might have a significant impact upon another human being and through them to others, their family, the community. And who is to say that one word in season, one act of kindness offered in Jesus' name might not have a life changing effect (possibly in later life) on an individual? Who is to say that one of these might not lead someone to act kindly towards others and that one of them might in turn have a hugely influential role in the world? God knows! We don't need to understand all the ramifications, the permutations, the possibilities – all we need to know is that God is working his purposes out for good to those who love him – and that as we trust him in the wee things as well as the big, we can choose to take the initiative and speak and act in a way that is kindly, loving, gracious and intended to further his purposes – small or large, public or private – surely that is better than sitting on our hands? And, if sometimes, our well intended interventions don't work out as expected that's still ok – God can deal with that too.

Yes, perhaps sometimes we will still have to watch we don't jump the gun, but on balance, I believe we've to be more willing to take the initiative with God. And sometimes that will mean doing things differently, thinking outside the box.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.