

THE DIGNITY OF RESISTANCE IN SOLIDARITY
The Story of Rizpah

Biblical Reflections on 2 Samuel 21:1-14

The issue of justice and dignity for Palestine is the thing that will define us in terms of our Christian witness, in terms of our solidarity and our commitment. So I am grateful to be part of this very special gathering. Thank you for making that possible.

I thought, friends, about what we would like to say this morning. Clearly we will have some moments of very deep analysis of the situation in Palestine by people who have been there in the very recent past. So I will not much in this biblical reflection try to tell you what is today happening in Palestine, but I will see where we can draw the lines of connection from here.

I have found in the Bible a person that I think personifies for me what we should be all about when we talk about Christians and Muslims and people of faith in South Africa, and the situation in Palestine: our calling, our solidarity, our sacrificial commitment, our courage, as we as people of faith seek to determine and find our place in solidarity with those who suffer. And I found her in the second book of Samuel, chapter 21:1-14.

This is how Scripture reads:

“Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the LORD. The LORD said. “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death”. So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. (Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites; although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had tried to wipe them out in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah). David said to the Gibeonites, “What shall I do for you? How shall I make expiation that you may bless the heritage of the LORD”? The Gibeonites said to him: “It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house; and neither is it for us to put anyone to death in Israel”. He said, “What do you say that I should do for you”? They said to the king, “The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be handed over to us and we will impale them before the Lord at Gibeah on the mountain of the Lord”, and the king said, “I will hand them over”.

“But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul’s son Jonathan, because of the oath of the Lord that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. The king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; and gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites and they impaled them on the mountain before the LORD. Seven of them perished together when they were put to death in the first days of harvest at the beginning of the barley harvest. Then Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it on a rock for herself, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens. She did not allow the birds of the air to come onto the bodies by day, or the wild animals by night, and when David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul had done, David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the people of Jabesh-gilead who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them up, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. He brought them up from there; the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and they gathered the bones of those who had been impaled. And they buried the bones of Saul and of his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of his father Kish. They did all that the king commanded. And after that God heeded supplications for the land”.

Rizpah and her story are not very well known at all. Not many people find time to reflect upon this woman; books tend to ignore her. Even books on women in the Bible, many of them written by feminist theologians, easily skip her. There is a very authoritative women’s commentary on the Bible written especially by women for women, intended to make up for the gaps in interpretation and understanding that men have so often allowed in their interpretation of the Bible. But even in that book, *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, the name of Rizpah is not mentioned in its treatment of Second Samuel. But she is, I think, the subject and the heart of one of the most inspiring stories in the Bible. So here’s the story.

Saul was on the throne and he had apparently, so we must deduct from what we see here, a non-aggression pact with the Gibeonites who lived by the grace of the king of Israel, on the territory of Israel, amongst them. For some reason - we do not know why for the story remains vague on this point - Saul breaks this pact unilaterally. Whether there was actual bloodshed we do not know but there is reference to it in the term “blood guilt” and in the word “destroy” used by the Gibeonites. What Saul had exactly done is never clear from the stories, and from what we know. Some think there was some sort of political oppression of the Gibeonites rather than military action. One

commentator says that Saul might have been driven by what we today would call racism, but that is pure speculation, we don't know. Another commentary argues the fact that the Bible tells us that Saul might have done this "in his zeal for the people of Israel" is a kind of justification that might have been acceptable within Israel. "It might have been wrong", they might have said, "but we understand". Whatever the situation, Saul has clearly done wrong.

Years later, after the unification of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, David is on the throne and the land is struck with drought. It is a national disaster. And it's such that they cannot but come to the conclusion that this natural disaster is a punishment from God. In times of national crisis when the people suffer, the leadership must take responsibility. And so David, pious king that he is, "inquires of the LORD", which means he goes to the prophets of the Court, he consults the priests and theologians, and he asks them: "tell me what this is all about". They come to the conclusion: yes it is a punishment of the LORD, but it is a punishment for what Saul had done. So David goes to the Gibeonites and he says: I know that Saul has done a great injustice to you. What shall I do to make expiation? In using the word "expiation" David brings in an important theological dimension: that of reconciliation, for expiation literally here, in this text means: how can I make good for what has been done wrong?. Our word "restitution" is close to the word David uses. How can I turn this evil into good? What is it that I can do that can set the relationship right between us? What is it that I can do that would make you feel that justice had been done to you?

For that reason David uses the meaningful words, "so that you may bless the heritage of the LORD?" The "blessing" for the people of Israel, the breaking of the drought, is expected from the Gibeonites. So the Gibeonites say, well it's not really for us to decide, but this thing of Saul and that his sons are still living, is a problem for us. In the end David listens, and determines to do what they tell him. Seven young men are hung on crosses on the hills outside the city. All of this is done because David inquired from the Lord, remember, he heard God's voice, the priests heard God's voice, the prophets of the Court heard God's voice, and so what is being done is because God wills it so. Everybody is pleased, including God.

There are a number of important things about this gruesome event. It is a ritual killing. It is done in expiation. It is a blood sacrifice to appease the Gibeonites and to please God. But it also is a punishment for the sins of Saul and so it has a political aspect to it: a king that makes right what another king had done wrong. It is also a public execution. David means to set an example for everybody. A public execution, a public crucifixion like that, exactly what the Romans would excel

at with such great effect much later, is meant to strike fear into the hearts of those who might have the same kind of ideas, "*n afskrikmiddel*". It is intimidation by terror. It is calling for unquestioning obedience by instilling terror and fear of death. And this is what David is doing here.

There are some scholars who raise the possibility that our story does not belong where it is in Second Samuel Chapter 21, but had in actual fact taken place earlier. There are indeed all sorts of reasons why the Rizpah story is a little of an uncomfortable combination with the other chapters towards the end of this book. It belongs, they say, closer to 2 Samuel 15. But 2 Samuel 15 is the tragic story of the uprising organized by Absalom, David's son, against his father and the claim that Absalom makes on the throne of his father.

If the story belongs there, then it means that we must cast a colder eye than the romantic view of religion on this happening here. Then it means that David is feeling so threatened by what had happened in his own family, by his own son, that he no longer can afford to let live those sons of the dead king who might also be a threat to his throne. Of course it is true that in reality these seven young men could not have been much of a threat to David. Two of them were sons of a concubine and five were grandsons. In the fierce and brutal battles for the throne after Saul's death (2 Sam. 1-5), their names are not even mentioned. In his actions David is guilty of overkill. But for David and the Court, goes the counter argument, the issue of national security is paramount here. Clearly the fact that David inquires of the Lord and his consultation with the men in the palace who must give him advice and so forth, tells us that David's concern is not just for himself. It is a national concern. Then anything and everything is justified.

If it were up to me, David might be saying, I would be feeling different. After all, it might be true that none of these boys are really a threat to me. But because it is national security that is at stake, and not just my own feelings, I have to make these hard decisions. It might come across as harsh to the rest of the world, but you know, *uneasy lies the head that wears the crown*. We know the argument. We call for justice here for our own people and for the Palestinians but the president must always make much more difficult decisions than you and I can fathom. When national security, or trade, or diplomatic relations are at stake, government sometimes has to do things that are in fact a betrayal of justice, but responds to what is called "political realism". This is how David's mind works. So he hangs them all; all seven sons of the line of Saul except poor crippled Mephibosheth, the son of his friend Jonathan. Blood has flowed and so everyone is appeased.

The bodies are not taken off the crosses and given a decent burial, that's part of the punishment, that's part of the terror, that's part of the intimidation. Against the law in Deuteronomy, the bodies are kept hanging on the crosses. David gives instructions that the bodies may not decently be buried and mourned over by the family but eaten by the carrion birds and by the beasts of the *veld*, bit by bit by bit, so that all who pass by can see: this is what happens when you rise up against the king, or when you displease the king, or when you bring the security of the state in danger. Looking at those bodies on the crosses, this is what the people see: a ritual killing, something that has to do with God. It's also a political killing, a public execution with a lesson for everybody. No decent burial heaps shame upon shame upon shame. There shall be no closure for these families. No comfort. There shall be no end to the shame and to the pain.

So right here I think we already have all the elements we know so well. You can cast your mind back just a little bit to our own history and all the elements we can see even today, and if you think of what you have experienced in the land of Israel and Palestine when you were there, you will recognize this. There is a scourge on the land and because there is a scourge on the land there is no security for anyone. A national crisis or disaster causes a national fear and that always allows us to circumvent all the rules or create our own. Suppression of all opposition and denial of basic human rights is called a "state of emergency"; state terror is called a "preemptive strike"; an illegal occupation is called "self-defence". Of course, God is consulted and God is presented as being an essential part of all this. What is happening is the will of God, we hear. "Before the LORD, before the LORD, before the LORD" is the constant refrain. Even the crucifixion is done "before the LORD on the mountain of the LORD". This is to please God; it is God's will that is done in this way. People are punished with a brutality and cruelty that is mind boggling but always there is religious sanction for it. Survival plays a role, and so does permanent victimhood. Because David is the victim of Saul's sins of years ago and he is the victim of perceived threats from these young boys from the family of Saul's who in his twisted logic threaten his throne in the same way that his own son had threatened his throne, all actions are justified. The fear in David's heart brings instability to the whole nation.

Likewise, the actions we see today are curiously public actions. Very little that happens in Palestine happens behind closed doors. Oh yes, the torture perhaps. But the most remarkable thing of what is happening there is the utter shameless visibility of it. The disproportionate, violent display of power stuns the mind. It is as if every single day new crosses arise around the hills of

the holy city. And you have to walk by those crosses; you cannot help but see them. And in the war the bodies were left on the streets last year in Gaza, to be picked at by the carrion birds, families could not bury their dead because it was to be a lesson for all who think that they could jeopardize the security of the state. And it is all understandable and it is all forgivable. And it is all so clear. It's not that they really want to do these things but there are plenty of reasons why. As those crosses rise on the hill by order of the king, the fearful thing is not so much the *number* of those crucified. It is the sheer *repetitiveness* of the action that leaves people shaken.

And so the actions are public, the actions are ruthless, the actions are brutal, and the actions are intended to set an example. The wall, what is more public than that wall? What is more public than the occupation? What is more public than war, the physical and the psychological harassment, the continued assault upon people's dignity, the deliberate denial of the very, very basic rights: to life, food, water, health, to healing. What is more public than the denial of the comfort children need and deserve: the right to know that the land that they were born in is the land in which they belong. No guarantee that they will grow up to live, no surprise when they die without knowing why.

The crosses upon which the bodies of the sons of Saul are hung are as visible as the crosses upon which the sons of Palestine are hanging, and the women and the children, because they dare to lay claim to the land, they dare to lay claim to the right to live, they dare to lay claim to the dignity of resistance.

And then enters Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, and with her the whole tone of the story changes. Up to now, the focus of the story had been on the palace, and on the men in the palace, with their power and their deliberation and their decisions, and their power to make decisions about life and death. That's where the focus was. And now the focus moves from the palace and the throne, to the hill and the crosses, and the bodies on the crosses. Below that, on the rock, appears Rizpah. She spreads sackcloth "for herself" because she is alone, and because she is in mourning. She is determined to stay on that rock, for as long as is necessary. She will not go away. Amazingly she remains there "from the beginning of harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens. She did not allow the birds of the air to come on the bodies by day, or the wild animals by night". All this time, every day, every night, she does not rest for a single moment.

Look at her in your mind's eye and see that woman in her vulnerability, her foolishness, her immeasurable dignity. See the seven crosses spread out on the hill, see her running from cross to cross, from body to body, arms swinging like a wind mill; her voice hoarse from screaming and her body is tight and bent because she has to look to the heavens and she has to look to the ground. Here comes a jackal, and there comes something else; and she runs and chases them away and her resistance is so fierce and so relentless that not a single beast and not a single bird can maim or damage those bodies on the crosses. And know this: Rizpah looks up and she does not see crosses, she sees *bodies* on crosses. For her it is not a political spectacle, it is a human tragedy. It is not a display of indignity and shame; it is an assault upon the dignity and worthiness of God. She is driven by compassion, and by righteousness, and by justice, and by the fact that she knows she is right, because as she fights against the beasts of the *veld* she fights at the same time against the beasts in the palace; those men who rule, who have decided they have power, like God, over the lives and the deaths of these boys. They can decide what reconciliation is and they decide what God wants: restitution to secure peace, dead bodies to secure survival, a blood sacrifice to secure a future. It just so happens that the blood sacrifice serves the purposes of the men in power so very well.

And Rizpah, by her act of love and solidarity releases us from the power and the grip of the palace into the freedom of sacrificial resistance. She draws our attention away from the centers of power to the margins of suffering and righteousness. She does not remain in the coolness of the palace in the shadow of the throne, but she moves into the burning sun under the crosses. That's where her commitment lies. That's where her solidarity shows. She understands: however much the name of God is mentioned here, not everyone who calls "Lord, Lord!" knows the Lord. In the end, Rizpah knows, it is a political game that is being played here. She knows about political games, this woman, she was not for nothing the wife of a king.

We meet her for the first time in 2 Samuel 3 when Israel and Judah were still separate nations. Saul dies and as a widow of Saul she becomes a plaything the politics of succession. A key plaything true, but a plaything nonetheless. Ishboeth, son of Saul claims the throne. Abner, general in Saul's army, also wants to succeed Saul, and in the cauldron of the political battle that follows sleeps with Rizpah. Like the wives of David who are forced to sleep with Absalom on the roof of the palace for all to see in his claim on David's throne, she has no say in the matter. The one who sleeps with the wife of the king is the one whose claim on the throne is stronger. There is no love, there is no affection, and they hold her hostage until Abner wins the battle and lays claim

to the throne of Saul. Then they move on. David first makes a deal with Abner, then Abner is killed by two assassins, removed as a threat and when the game is over Rizpah is discarded like a used rag.

We don't hear from her for all this time until chapter 21, and here she is, the victim of chapter 3, whose refusal to be a victim is seen in the dignity of her outrage. She says, "I rise up and I say: over my name shall not be written victim, but woman in resistance". She knows that victimhood saps your courage; she knows that victimhood saps your sense of justice; she knows that victimhood focuses solely on oneself, and on oneself alone, and one forgets about others who are in greater need than we ourselves are, and one forgets that solidarity calls all of us across all the borders of self-defence and self-justification, and that it is far more important to stand on the side of those to whom injustice is being done than to sit in the shadow where self-pity is cloaked in victimhood.

So she rises above all of that personal, painful history, even as she rises above the brutal, merciless realities of power. A remarkable woman, this. And she challenges the king and all of the men in the palace and the generals, and everybody who thinks that the way to appease God and secure the nation is through the sacrifice of the innocent: *that* sacrifice is one sacrifice too many. I will not have it, and I know I will not have it, because God will not have it. A victim of abuse she was, but she becomes the champion of justice. That is how she resists: with her voice, and with her body, and with her energy and with her love; with her dignity and courage; protecting, preserving, uplifting, redeeming. She does not believe, clearly, the king and his priests. You might say that this is the word of God, she says, but to me this word of God fits just too neatly into the word of the King; the will of God just covers too snugly the will of the king. She does not believe that, and her resistance is her testimony. This God you claim for this deed of murder, she says, is not the God I know. It is not the God of Sarah, it's not the God of Hannah, it is not the God of Hagar, the slave woman, the mother of Ishmael as dismal in the household of Sarai as Rizpah herself felt in the household of David. Hagar's God listens to her voice, sees her in her suffering, calls to her in her discarded state; and when Abraham disowns her and throws her out into the wilderness with one loaf of bread and one sack of water and with her boy on her shoulder, and she moves into the wilderness all on her own; that's the God who hears her and keeps her, and gives her a promise, the same promise that God gives Abraham word for word for word, the only woman in the Hebrew Bible to whom such a promise is given. Now, we Christians don't even regard her as a mother of faith. Shame on us.

But in Rizpah, Hagar rises again. So she says, I am looking for that God that you have betrayed, and I will find that God. And in what she does she represents Israel's God, truly, not the powerful in the palace who made that claim into a falsehood. She unmaskes the ideology that parades as religious devotion; she challenges the idolatry that claims the right to determine life and death. She exposes the heresy that proffers political expedience and the abuse of power as reconciliation. She says, "This is not reconciliation". She strips of their power those precious myths that beguile the people and purport to be sanctioned by God; those myths emanating from the palace: "survival", and "national security", and "chosen people", and "sacred land". For if the nation's security is secured by injustice and oppression, if one's chosenness is to be upheld by the rejection of one's flesh and blood, then nothing can be farther from the truth; and if the land is defiled by innocent blood it loses its sacredness. Rizpah does not only question the assumptions and ideologies of the palace; she shakes the very foundations of David's kingship.

The vigil on the rock amongst those crosses is a Kairos written in courage, faith and endless solidarity. We have got to understand this woman's situation here. First of all, she is a woman. She is a widow of a dead king whose sons have become a threat to the living king. Why take the risk that she is taking? Who is she doing it for? What makes her think that she can take on David who on this point has turned into this Goliath of evil?

Secondly, Rizpah does this all alone. Right through the story it's just her. There is no man who comes and says, the night is dark, the night is cold, I will protect you. Maybe you can't battle these animals on your own. I will help you. Not a single one. There is not a single woman who comes to hold her hand in sisterly solidarity; not a single one. She is on her own all the time. Oh, she probably had lots of sympathy; lots of people in the city saying, "*Ag shame look at that*". Lots of people who might have thought: My goodness, how can the king do this? But nobody has the courage to speak up, and nobody has the courage to be seen with her, to join her in her struggle for truth and justice. They would rather die. Nobody leaves the comfort of their home to join her on that lonely rock. Sympathy is not solidarity. "*Ag, shame*", is not solidarity. Writing a letter is not solidarity. Rizpah shows us what solidarity means: with her body and with the risks she takes on behalf of the people who are dead, not even living.

Third, she is in mourning, this woman, but she is in mourning for her children as well as for her people. Her children might be dead but her people are going astray, she knows this is the wrong

path to take, this is not where security lies, this is not the way to peace. Your security king, and your security my people, your longing to be a stable kingdom, cannot lie in the innocent blood of young men who have done you no harm, except in being who they were: the embodiment of your fear.

Rizpah understands what that means. And so she cries for her own children, but she cries for all of the children of Israel. So if we cry for the children of Soweto, the children of Alexandra, or the children of Gugulethu, the children of Bonte- heuwel, and we cannot cry for the children of Palestine we do not know what it means to have faith.

Fourth, and this is probably the most remarkable thing if not the last. Notice that Rizpah fights for all those seven boys on the crosses. *All of them*. Yet only two of them are hers. The other five belong to Merab. But where is Merab? Merab is nowhere to be found. Maybe Merab has good reasons why she's not there, with Rizpah, protesting the death of her children. Maybe Merab thinks, my own security is at risk here, I cannot possibly fight the king. Maybe Merab thinks, I am too shy or maybe I am not strong enough. Maybe Merab thinks, I do not want to look foolish in the eyes of the city. Because you can just bet on it: Rizpah looked absolutely foolish. They thought she was crazy. She thinks, I'd rather be crazy with love than drunk with power.

Rizpah says, only two children on those crosses are mine, I don't care, *every* child on the cross is my child. As long as there is one single child on the cross of pain, and indignity, of suffering and futurelessness, I will stand up and I will fight for that child. Don't ask me whether he is my child, she may not carry my name, but she is my child, he is my child. That is what solidarity means: *every child on a cross is my child*.

The fifth thing about this remarkable woman, and this is as startling, is: the young men are dead. She can no longer save them. But she can save the soul of her people because she knows what is at stake here. To the men and women who pass by, look at her strangely and perhaps pityingly, saying, "Rizpah can't you see they're dead? You can't bring them to life again!", Rizpah responds, "It does not matter. What is in danger of dying is not my boys. What is in danger of dying is the soul of Israel". If we do not stand up like Rizpah for the people on the cross in Palestine, at stake is not just the lives of those in Palestine. What is at stake is the dying of our soul.

I can't make it plainer than that.

So the story comes to an end. Rizpah rose up in resistance. She prayed, she guarded, she protected. She called the attention of the whole city to this atrocity, no more, she awakened their consciences. She kept the faith, and she kept them all responsible. Not just the Gibeonites who somehow exacted this punishment; not just David who was so eager to commit murder to “please the LORD”; not just the priests and the theologians of the Court who were so eager to justify; also the people who were so willing just to let it all happen – in the name of the God of liberation, justice and compassion. And at last, the Bible says, at last, she shamed the king into doing what is right. Notice that right through the story Rizpah says not a single word. But how marvellously eloquent and convincing are her deeds! She does not speak, so God speaks for her, and now the king can no longer ignore her. He knows: it is not the priests or the prophets or the theologians of the Court. In the acts of this amazing woman he hears the very voice of God. *Now* he knows it.

So David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the people of Jabesh-gilead who had stolen them from the public square in Beth-shan. And he then brings the bones of Saul and Jonathan, and he buries them, takes the bodies off the crosses and gives them all a decent burial. It is indeed the decent thing to do. So finally they come to rest: Jonathan and Saul and the seven young men. David understands: in his shame at what he had done is the essence of repentance; his repentance is the acknowledgement of the truth, and the acknowledgement of truth is the beginning of restitution and restoration. Now *that* is reconciliation.

But it does not end there: forgiveness and healing follow. “They buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela in the tomb of his father Kish; they did all that the king commanded”. And “after that”, verse 14, goes on, “after that, God heeded supplications for the land”. After what? After David’s political games? After, the sick politics they called expiation, restitution, reconciliation? After blood has been spilled, after the crosses have been displayed and the bodies on them left for birds and animals to eat up? After all of that? No. After Rizpah and her acts of faith and justice and fearless solidarity. Then, and only then, did God heed the supplications for the land. Only when Rizpah did what she did, did God hear and break the drought, and the rains came down. And only then, when “rain fell on (the bodies) from the heavens”, did Rizpah leave her lonely rock and reclaimed her life. And it does not even end there. After *that*, the story tells us, the LORD heeded supplications, “for the land”.

You thought she was doing it for her children? Just for the seven of them? God knew what she was doing. And so this woman, in her love, in her faithfulness and her solidarity; in her courage and her willingness to take the risks, to make herself vulnerable; in her willingness to make herself look foolish, in her willingness to take on the men of power in every single palace in the world, in doing that she saved the whole land. The whole people was blessed because she remained faithful. Not just those who suffered, also those who stood idly by. And also those who caused the pain.

What can I say?

Oh, that at this time of Kairos, God finds and raises up Rizpahs in South Africa. To stand upon the rock and underneath the crosses, to fight for the dignity of those who have died. And for the life of those who are yet to find life.

God bless you all.

Allan Boesak

SACC Consultation on Palestine

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