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THE FAILURE OF EMPIRE TO PROTECT
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Seldom do the intimate private biblical narratives of the lives of the royal household of King David appear in our church lectionary in any given year. The Christian Liturgical calendar takes us from the season of Advent through to Christ the King Sunday and throughout the 36 months of the 3 year lectionary the second book of Samuel chapter 13 never appears. We can open the daily newspaper and read of tragedy the world over that continues to be heaped upon women young and old and from tiny village to corporate professional and yet in our weekly journey through the bible we skip past the passages that disturb us and cling to the passages that comfort us and continue to provide us with hope and sustenance. The reality is that the bible passages that disturb us are so easily kept hidden from the eyes and ears of our congregations and families. Then in reality when these texts are perpetrated into our everyday lives the way we respond mirrors Absalom's forced silence upon his sister. We reflect the male hierarchical silence in our inability to embrace the victim and give her voice. We become complicit because of our inability to make public the shame and the perpetrated violence against our women. The way we respond and react to these texts as they are relived and re-violated in our real lives today is dependent on those who have power over us, our leaders, our ministers, our brothers. We have found it too easy to push the violation aside and silence the victim for the sake of pride, honour and respect within the community and church.

The Rape of Tamar is the sad story of the theft of purity and innocence to greed and lust. According to Phyllis Trible (1984) it is a story about "A family enmeshed in royal rape. Brother violates sister. He is a prince to whom belong

power, prestige, and unrestrained lust. She is a princess to whom belong wisdom, courage, and unrelieved suffering. Children of one father, they have not the same care of each other. Indeed, the brother cares not at all.” (Trible, 1984:37).

Virginity in most cultures is something that young women are taught and expected to treasure until marriage. Many traditional cultures classify virginity as the exceptional bride-price or bargaining currency when forming new alliances across family, tribal and communal boundaries.

In traditional Samoan times and even today, the female child is referred to as the “tamasa”, the sacred child. To her brother she is referred to as “le ioi mata o lona tuagane” the inner pupil through which he views life. It is his role in life to protect his sister and to serve her diligently.

And so we come to the context in which Tamar is presented. Regardless of whether Amnon is only Tamar’s half-brother there is a sacred boundary line between them that should not be crossed. It is ok for her to have served her brother as instructed by her father in his time of need to aid his healing as he was deemed to be unwell and in need of his sister’s care. King David was unaware of Amnon’s lying scheme to bring his sister into his sleeping quarters that he might rape her. The words sister of Absalom, my brother, Trible states that “for the first time, fraternal language enters to indicate friction between the royal sons. The designation, “sister-of-Absalom,” supports this tension while deflecting Tamar’s kinship to Amnon. The entire phrase implies a different obstacle from the narrated explanation. According to Amnon, Absalom, not virginity, stands between the object of his desire. If this male can be removed, the female becomes accessible.” (Trible, 1984:40).

Tamar is sent by her father to care for her brother. She is the innocent victim in all this carrying out the instructions of both her father and her brother. It is clear that she did not visit him alone as in verse 9 Amnon says “*send everyone out of the room*”. Tamar is left alone with Amnon. This was the warning sign which was ignored, that a brother and sister should be left alone in the bedroom should not have been allowed. Unfortunately because of the hierarchy of power the servants were not in a position to challenge this command and so everyone left the room. Where were Tamar’s palace sisters? Mother? Were they aware of what she was asked to do for her brother? Where was her protective entourage? The words “Go to the house of Amnon your brother”, according to Tribble the fraternal reference would seem to guarantee safety. Tribble continues, “unwittingly, David has sealed Tamar’s fate.” The sons request had become the King’s order. (Tribble, 1984:42).

The mystery and the reality. Amnon’s longing for something he could not have ‘forbidden love’ but it was not shared by Tamar. In the words of Tamar “Such a thing should not be done in Israel” Incest was forbidden in any form and in this case especially for a brother and sister to have sexual relations regardless whether they were half siblings or not. Amnon got what he wanted and then when he realised the enormity of what he had done it was too late. It became all her fault, therefore he hated her even more. He said “get up and get out”. **16** *"No!" she said to him. "Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me." But he refused to listen to her.*

There was no desire to remedy his wrong, no desire to protect his sister from the shame he had brought upon her, no desire to even provide a place for her to live in. He just wanted her out of his sight and out into the shame of the royal community that should have never allowed this to happen.

Even Tamar's full brother Absalom did not want Tamar to talk about his thing that their brother had done to her. But he took her into his home and looked after her and eventually sought justice in the slaying of his brother Amnon two years later.

I remember the story of young girl who had been violated by her step-father taking the courage to speak out. She told her mother and her mother denied her her truth and retaliated by shaving her daughters head so she would be shamed wherever she went. This act of shaving of a daughters head is often used to deliberately shame the female; she is always the villain and never the victim. She must have done something to encourage the unwanted attention; she must have flirted and used her charm to lure him into lustful desire. She must have dressed in a fashion that was asking to be raped, she was easy meat. We too often blame the female for acts of rape and violation against them and we too often find a story that paints the male as merely responding to temptation as an act of bravado.

'All of the persons involved in this sordid tale are within David's immediate family'.⁷ They express, delicately but unmistakably, the scandalous nature of Amnon's passion. The author is writing for members of a community in which sex between brother and sister was forbidden as a pagan practice (Smith, 1990:25)

Surely, this being King's David's daughter should have brought a death sentence upon Amnon for doing what he did as "Such a thing should not be done in Israel". Where was King's David's voice over the violation of his daughter? We are told he was furious, but still he did nothing. All the power in the world and yet he chooses to keep silent! Power in this instance is the power to choose a son's crime over a daughter's rape and violation. Power in this

instance is the power to be furious and yet do nothing about it. All powerful and yet all hypocritical.

Why was David angry? Was it because Tamar was raped or was it because his first born had committed this shameful act? “Is David angry with Amnon for what he has done, or is David angry about what has happened to Amnon? In other words, does the father’s love for his firstborn condone or denounce the crime? David’s anger signifies complete sympathy for Amnon and total disregard for Tamar. How appropriate that the story never refers to David and Tamar as father and daughter! The father identifies with the son; the adulterer supports the rapist; male has joined male to deny justice for the female.” (Trible, 1984:54).

As servants of God what role do we have in becoming the complicit silent barrier between the criminal and the violated? How do we close the doors on wrong doing and send our victims out onto the street vulnerable and naked? In this story there is a culture of complicity that protects those in power and shames those who are already vulnerable. Do we do this in our churches?

All too often our cultures and communities the church included solve their shame and problems with the words “Don’t take this thing to heart.” This thing being an act of violation, an (Trible, 1984:52) act of dominance and power. We are forced to be complicit after all these are our brothers. The church is good at using fraternal language to cover up crimes committed by those who purport to be our brothers and yet commit crimes against humanity and against God. The shame continues to be borne by the women violated!

Unfortunately there are far too many stories of this nature that mars the corridors of power in all our communities both in church and society, big and

small. I have had the sad undertaking of listening to the stories of incest and abuse within families that were afraid to speak out. Stories of mothers taking their daughters shame and pain to the grave with them. Stories of daughters who gave birth to their father's children and fathers who continued to violate that sacred boundary between father and daughter and yet still remain within the protected sanctity of Christian marriage. I conclude with some questions for us to consider.

What happens in our own families, churches and communities when people's human rights are raped and violated? Are we complicit in hiding our shame? Do we expect to keep silent for the sake of public shame?

Do our leaders speak out in their defence? Or is there a silence which forbids you to speak out against injustice?

What can we change in our communities that will encourage the victims of violence to have a voice and be supported?

So be it.