



Responding to what intimidates us

A sermon by the Rev. Ian Arnold

The reason why the Lord alone endures the conflicts brought on by temptations and is Conqueror is that the Divine alone can conquer the hells. If the Divine did not counteract them they would rush in like a mighty ocean, one hell after another; and man is utterly powerless to resist them.

Even so, this does not mean that (we) should stay our hands and wait for immediate influx; rather (we) should fight as though we acted from (ourselves), but nevertheless should acknowledge and believe that we act from the Lord. (Arcana Caelestia 8175 and 8176)

RESPONDING positively and practically TO WHAT INTIMIDATES and negatively looms large over US.

From this story of David and Goliath I've chosen two verses, and they highlight two very different moods and attitudes. First of all in verse 11:

"When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid."

And then in verse 48, towards the end of this story and the end of the chapter:

"So it was that when the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, that David hurried and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine."

That's verse 11 and verse 48 highlighting and giving expression to two very different attitudes and moods in the story.

Friends, as many people of my generation did, I grew up being intimidated by, and in awe of, professional people. As a very young child I had a lot to do with hospitals and doctors and specialists for over three years, and it left an indelible imprint on me as to the way in which I was ever thereafter to regard, look up to, and respect the members of the medical profession. It began when I was a boy of two, and it ended when I was five. As I grew older, I can remember a time when I was intimidated by, and in awe of, bank managers. And to this day, being no different from you I'm sure, I am intimidated by a policeman in uniform, especially when a police car pulls up alongside of me and indicates to me to pull me over! I go hot and cold. The last time it happened, I was in such a state I couldn't even remember my date of birth!

It's not just people, is it friends, who intimidate us? I can also think of situations. I can also think of circumstances. Forty years on it's something that comes easily to me, that I can stand up in a church and lead a service and give a sermon. And I have to, as it were, extract myself from that to understand how much that could intimidate somebody else. How much in awe they might be of a request, of an invitation, to lead a service or to read a sermon. Again, you yourself may be able to call on memories about times when you were called forward, like in school because you have achieved in some way or another, or

worst of all if you were called up to some platform to shake some adults hand. For some people, that is enormously intimidating.

As we begin to look within ourselves, friends, we are able to identify many things, even on a relatively external level, which intimidate us and we are in awe of. I can think of disappointments, I can think of mistakes that I have made in the past, I can think of unwise decisions as I now see them to be. I can think of resentments that have bubbled along in the past, and perhaps still rankle to his day. We can still be in awe of these things, still be intimidated by them: why did I make that decision, how could I have chosen as I did do? And we really feel the power that that particular decision, or mistake as we now believe it to be, holds over us.

And if we go on a little bit further within ourselves, and look and explore and investigate, we can find other things that intimidate us. We can find habits that seem to be so ingrained, so very much part now of who we are, that we stand back from them, feeling powerless. Or we can look and explore and investigate, and we can see our proprium much too active in certain ways; more active perhaps than we are wanting to admit or acknowledge; and we feel intimidated that we havent become stronger in our resistance to the way in which the proprium the self dictates, rules, governs and directs our responses and the way we handle our life and relationships.

It is possible that in coming face to face with these things some people are, or could be, indifferent. But what is much more common, as is highlighted here in this story, is a feeling of being defeated by these things before they have even begun to do anything about them.

What did the army of ancient Israel do when Goliath burst of the scene? The answer is, the soldiers ran around telling themselves they were powerless, that there was no way out. It was as if they were paralysed by it all. They felt disempowered. They didnt know what to do! How could they match this giant? They were sure they would just have to succumb, to give in. They acted as people who were defeated before they began.

There is a lesson here for us, friends, lesson number one: that in the face of what intimidates us, in the face of what seems to have such power over us, the very worst thing we can do is to run around telling ourselves that we are powerless, we can do nothing about this, we cannot match the challenge that this particular thing represents. What happened with this army? They looked, they cracked, their knees knocked, and they told themselves that the situation was hopeless. What a bunch of dummies! They made a vital mistake: they had looked around at all the soldiers who had come, all the resources they had brought with them, and they saw nothing that would enable them to rise to the challenge that Goliath represented; a fatal mistake. The fatal mistake you see, is to look around, cast around, only for the resources that you can see, that you can put your eyes and hands on; and they are never adequate. They are never, ever adequate.

As recently as yesterday, in "The Weekend Australian", there were two or three superb articles dealing with the challenge of Islamic terrorism. But I felt less impressed by the

time I finished reading them, because they are looking only to human resources to meet the onset of this challenge that is emerging throughout much of the world. If we look only to human resources, we will never adequately respond to this challenge, and indeed we run all the risk of being defeated by it. That was the mistake that the Israelite army made: looking to human resources, human ingenuity, thinking that they had to find what would match their perception of the challenge. We so easily do the same, in so many ways and with respect to so many challenges, right down to the much more personal challenges that we face. It's our over-active proprium struggling against the dispensation of divine providence, the perception that life isn't unfolding as we hoped or anticipated that it would do. These sorts of things will arise as challenges in our lives, and if we are not careful, we will be defeated by them, if we think that there are, and has to be, only human resources to combat them.

But then David arrived on the scene. It's always wonderful, by the way, when someone comes along with a fresh new perspective, because they somehow seem to be able to cut through all that seems to be blanketing the whole situation, and they can see something that we haven't seen before and, bang, we see the way that we should respond to or go about meeting this particular challenge. Yes, David represents a fresh perspective, but he represents more than that; he represents something within us. Young we were, yes, a youth as he was, but he came along with a profound conviction that human resources would always be inadequate: "What are you people doing? You are forgetting that there are divine resources available to us, and I will trust in them!" And so he went about it; and so he defeated the challenge he and his people were facing.

There were four things, please note, with which David went into battle with Goliath. Firstly, there was his trust in the Lord: his overriding conviction that human resources had nothing to do with it, that Divine resources were going to be the key. Secondly, there was his unhesitating willingness to turn and face the challenge. Recall for a moment, will you, lesson number one: we want to run away from what looms large negatively over us, we want to deny it; but David turned and faced it. That's rule number two: turn and face your challenges. Don't be intimidated and awed by them to the extent that you feel paralysed and helpless. Thirdly, David took action.

And fourthly he called upon, and made use of, unadorned, straightforward and very simple weapons and resources that had been around for millennia, and to this day those same stones somewhere still are; unadorned, simple, straightforward weapons and resources that are available to us, and have been openly available to us for millennia back. They are, as you might have by now guessed, the truths of the Divine Word. Simple truths. In my pastoral work as a minister, let me tell you I have seen people sweating, challenged, paralysed, and uncertain because of the way they have been hurt by somebody else. What did Jesus say? *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone."* Why don't you do it, why don't you do it? Don't sit there, saying you can do nothing. Get on the phone; yes, it's hard, but let them know. A simple, straightforward, unadorned, but O so obvious truth from the Word becomes the weapon with which to do battle with this state that has developed and has enveloped you.

Whenever we feel challenged and intimidated, or when life unexpectedly goes wrong, for whatever reason or under whatever circumstances there are always simple truths from the Word we can use in the situation. Anxious about the future? Think, then, on this: *"Why do you worry?, the Lord said, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."* Do you feel lost or insignificant, or that the events of your life are of no consequence to the Lord? Then think on this: *"The very hairs on your head are all numbered."* Is life chaotic at the moment? Many decisions to be made? Things crowding in? Bring this to mind: *"Be still, and know that I am God."* They're all simple, straightforward, unadorned weapons and resources that are made available to us in abundance from the Lord in His Divine Word. This is the key to meeting these inner challenges, those things whose shadows fall so negatively across our life, leading us to feel unable to do anything to change the situation.

In conclusion friends, I just want to pick up something with you, and I hope you can commit it to memory. And its from this particular volume, the sixth volume of Arcana Caelestia, and it simply says this, its paragraph 4353: *"Action comes first."*

You know sometimes I'm stuck identifying a theme, a text, something that I hope will bring a meaningful sermon. Action comes first. If I do nothing, nothing will happen and my problem will only grow. And it's the same right through: do nothing, and the situation grows in it's capacity to intimidate and paralyse us. Do something, take action, and then the fight with Goliath begins.

Dont listen to the despair, the breast-beating, the wailing, and the certainty of defeat and of having to succumb to this challenge. Remember David. David went to meet his adversary with his profound trust in the Lord, his willingness to turn and face the enemy. David took with him five smooth stones, it is said, from the brook; the simple but eternal truths given to us, so plainly stated, in the Word and that hold the key to defeating what looms negatively and darkly over our lives.

"Then David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone; and he slung it and struck the Philistine in his forehead, so that the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the earth. So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him. But there was no sword in the hand of David."

AMEN.