

"HOW TO BUILD A CITY"

I Samuel 26: 6:17

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by

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Israel had its origins and its name from Abraham; from Moses they were given the tradition of justice and law. But still one more ingredient is essential to complete Abraham's people, and that will come from David the king. David will achieve what no one before him was able to do; he will move the tribes of Israel off dead center; he will unite the separate groups into a people. David will build the city of Jerusalem. He will inspire the Jewish nation to have hope in their future and to build their nation on the basis of that hope.

This dynamism and conviction that David is credited with, the feeling that the dream for a better community can really be achieved, is a rare ingredient today in our time - some 3,000 years after David. As a matter of fact at least on the surface pessimistic moods usually have the upper hand. On the one side there are some who feel so completely disillusioned by the current social order that they can see no way out apart from the destruction of the society and its values as they are now constituted. This group is fluent on the case for destruction but less so regarding the concrete forms and relationships that are prescribed for the morning following.

We can all appreciate this attitude in view of the fact that social solutions to the problems of the nineteen sixties have not been achieved fast enough to meet the challenges; it is ironic that science and technology is almost flawless today (witness the Apollo 11 achievement with a 99.45% level of performance perfection) but interpersonal and community encounters are as confused and unsuccessful today as they have ever been in many western societies.

Let us seriously ask this question then: How shall we build meaningful community today? And then let us ask a historical question: How did David come up with his remarkable success in 1000 B.C.? He was able to draw together a basically heterogeneous collection of tribal people and inspire them with the determination to work together and to build together. Take the second question first: For the sake of dramatic relief let me suggest that there is a fascinating clue to David's greatness and social skill in an incident during his life as a young man just before he himself became king. The incident takes place during the period of Saul's reign. Saul is a failure; he has divided the people; he has lost popular support, and he has become pathologically suspicious toward all potential rivals to his authority. Because of this obsessive fear Saul is leading his soldiers against one of his own officers, David, even though the young subject has affirmed his loyalty to the king on many occasions.

"Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite, and to Joab's brother Abishai the son of Zeruah, 'Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul?' And Abishai said, 'I will go down with you.' So David and Abishai went to the army by night; and there lay Saul sleeping within

the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the army lay around him. Then said Abishai to David, 'God has given your enemy into your hand this day; now therefore let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice.' But David said to Abishai, 'Do not destroy him; for who can put forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?' And David said, 'As the Lord lives, the Lord will smite him; or his day come to die; or he shall go down into battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should put forth my hand against the Lord's anointed; but take now the spear that is at his head, and the jar of water, and let us go.' So David took the spear and the jar of water from Saul's head; and they went away. No man saw it, or knew it, nor did any awake; for they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the Lord had fallen upon them.

Then David went over to the other side, and stood afar off on the top of the mountain, with a great space between them; and David called to the army, and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, 'Will you not answer, Abner?' Then Abner answered, 'Who are you that calls to the king?' And David said to Abner, 'Are you not a man? Who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not kept watch over your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy the king your lord.'

This thing that you have done is not good. As the Lord lives, you deserve to die, because you have not kept watch over your lord, the Lord's anointed. And now see where the king's spear is, and the jar of water that was at his head.'

Saul recognized David's voice, and said, 'Is this your voice, my son David?' And David said, 'It is my voice, my lord, O king.'

-- I Samuel 26: 6-17

Note two things about David in this incident:

(1) He could have killed Saul which would have instantly altered the fortunes of Israel in David's favor but he refuses to do so. Put another way, David has the ready made and ideal opportunity for direct action. Standing with his men in Saul's tent, David was urged by his companions to take what he needed, what he wanted, even perhaps what he rightly deserved. But David will not do it; he feels obligated to obey the law of Moses, the traditions of Israel, and strangely enough he feels obligated to the man Saul.

(2) He renounces his right to discard the law but nevertheless he makes his point, and dramatically at that. With Saul's spear and water jug in David's hands the old king with his intrigue myopia has been decisively challenged. David has proven his point. The greatness of David is established. The people respect him above Saul. Consider what is at the core of David's secret.

He is able in this event to draw the distinction between the strong feelings of anger and disapproval he and his followers have toward Saul's leadership on the one side and his solidarity toward Saul as a man on the other side. He bravely objects to Saul's policies yet he refuses the easy way out in the moment of Saul's vulnerability. He will not destroy the old man as bad as he is.

This is how to build a city! The strategy is not easy but it will work;

there are four essential parts to this strategy that I believe are profoundly relevant to our present situation:

(1) Discover what kind of city you want to build. Ask the question, can this dream be realized within the larger boundaries of the social system that our social heritage has developed? If the answer to that question is "no" then the stage is set for violence. If the answer is "yes" or even "maybe" then the possibility of renewal and reform becomes the task of the dreamer.

(2) Keep faith in the dream and in its possibility. By this I mean: Continually work at every definition and prescription; check them out and submit them to evaluation, but hold to your vision! This is the distinguishing challenge of the Old Testament prophets. They realistically understand the problems of their generation; they only rarely fade into timidity and only rarely do they turn rancid with the disappointments that must have been wholesale most of the time. The Old Testament prophets call a spade a spade, with more hope than fear, with more love than anger. If you want to build a city take up their challenge.

(3) Then we must strategically advance our causes, our visions. Try to make your point with as much style as you can develop. Start with a small part of the whole and gain practice in the particular and local situation then build toward the whole.

(4) Finally, we must keep our solidarity with other men regardless of the controversies that divide our opinions. This is as I see it the whole point of obeying the law, because the law is the chief social symbol we have of the equality of all men. If we subvert or ignore law one of the first losses is this very solidarity of obligation man to man - that is the essential soul of all peace and justice. It is obviously harder to maintain the commitment toward that rascal Saul as a person and as leader when he is so obviously second rate, however, the greatness of David was vividly sealed in the instant decision he made during the black of night in his enemy's tent. That decision built the city. Each of us face similar crises moments too; our moment to chose may be less dramatic but no less portentous. Our causes may seem unnecessarily hindered by the establishments within which we live and there may be presented to us a strategy that seems swift and inescapable but what I am suggesting is that every strategy for building the city must be itself tested by this solidarity principle.

There you have a brief portrait of King David - great man, towering, unforgettable hero of the people. The intense irony of both his own life and that of his nation is that the greatness of Old Testament Israel reached both its highwater mark of glory and the beginning of its decline within the life of the lonely man David. David, son of Jesse who would not take the violent short cut with Saul, built the city of Jerusalem. But the same David, the king, at another moment in his life arranged for the brutal and deliberate murder of a young man Uriah who would have willingly died for his king. David wanted Uriah's wife Bathsheba and to have her he took direct action against his young friend. The king was later sorry and repented with overwhelming sincerity but the downward spiral of intrigue and political murder had been set into motion and all of the king's horses and all of the king's men could never reverse that spiral.

David, complex man that he is, stands alone as the unchallenged central figure of the Old Testament and the messianic hopes of Israel were from his time on to be stated in his name. All of Israel looked for a king of David's lineage to resolve and fulfill the deep hopes of the people. David is the right choice in the very profoundest sense because the Messiah must surpass David's greatness and resolve David's tragedy.