

***Achilles' secret is revealed* (Ⓢ 6:12)**

The day after Hector's funeral the awful tumult resumed. And, out on the battlefield, Achilles was in the thick of the battle, severing heads with every stroke of his sword. That night he was back on the battlefield, wrapped in a black cloak, clambering over the corpses, making his way so that he could look up at the tops of the walls of Troy, scanning them, desperate for a  
5 glimpse of that pretty Trojan princess, Polyxena.

Day after day he fought. Night after night he skulked, until eventually, exasperated, he bribed a Trojan foot soldier to take a note to her, begging her to meet him outside the walls in an ancient grove of olive trees.

And Polyxena read that letter and she remembered Achilles, she remembered his beauty. She  
10 looked at the golden ring on her finger and she was filled with love and longing for him. And that night, when the sky was bright with stars, she wrapped the black cloak over her shoulders and she hurried through the streets of Troy and through a secret gate, and across the plain to the olive grove.

Some of the trees were still standing and some were splintered, lying on the ground. And as  
15 she drew close, Achilles stepped out of the shadows and she ran into his arms. And those hands that had so recently been the death of her brother, fondled her tenderly. And they lay down on the grass together, locked in one another's arms.

But nothing is hidden from the mighty gods and goddesses. And high overhead Aphrodite, the goddess of love, called to golden Apollo and she said, "Apollo, look at this! Look at this! Look  
20 what I've made happen!"

And Apollo looked down and he said, "Shameless Polyxena! Shameless, shameless  
Aphrodite!"

And Aphrodite said, "But Apollo, don't you understand? This is our chance. Go to Paris. Tell him that his sister, Polyxena, has taken a lover, a Greek lover. Tell him to follow her tomorrow  
25 night, with a bow and a quiver full of arrows, and I'll put what words I can into Polyxena's mouth."

And suddenly Apollo understood. And he threw back his head and he shouted with laughter. And, as swift as thought, he flew through the air into Troy, into the palace of Paris, into the bedchamber, where Paris was lying asleep in Helen's arms.

30 And golden Apollo entered Paris' dreams. "Paris, did you know that your sister, Polyxena, has taken a lover, a Greek lover. Follow her tomorrow night with a bow and a quiver full of arrows."

And in that moment Paris woke up, with the words echoing in his mind. And all the next day he watched his sister, Polyxena, but she gave no clue, no hint, no indication, until the night came and the sky brightened with stars and he saw her hurrying through the streets in a black  
35 cloak and through a secret gate. And he grabbed a bow and a quiver full of arrows. And he

followed her. He followed her across the plain. He saw the grove of olive trees. He saw a figure stepping out of the shadows. He saw Polyxena running into his arms. And then Paris felt a cold shudder from the nape of the neck to the root of the spine. Achilles! He flattened himself against the ground. He pressed his face into the dirt, hardly daring to breath.

40 And, as he lay there, he could hear the lovers talking and laughing. And then he heard the sound of them lying down together. And Paris lifted his head. He peered over the trunk of a fallen tree. He could see Achilles. He could see the back of his head, his shoulders, the small of his back, the backs of his legs, his heels.

And then he heard Polyxena say, "My lover, I don't understand. You have been fighting in this war for as long as I can remember, since I was five years old. And yet you're unscratched. There's no mark, no bruise, no scar on your body. Why?"

And Achilles said, "Polyxena, when I was a baby my mother, Thetis, carried me down to the dark waters of the river Styx. She lowered me into the river. Wherever the water touched I am invulnerable. I cannot be harmed. The only place I can be harmed is where she held me, my heel."

Paris drew an arrow from the quiver. He fitted the arrow to the bowstring. He drew the bowstring back. He loosed the arrow. And it would have gone wide, wide of its mark, if golden Apollo had not been watching and waiting. He seized it as it flew through the air. He ran across and he plunged the point of it into Achilles' heel. And a great shudder went through Achilles' body and the life went out of him in one breath.

55 And Paris leapt to his feet. "Achilles is dead! Achilles is dead!"

He ran back to the city. He ran from street to street. "Achilles is dead! Achilles is dead!" In every house lanterns were lit, doors were thrown open, people came running into the streets. "Achilles is dead! Achilles is dead!"

### ***A mother honours her famous son (☺ 5:59)***

Back in the Greek camp, King Odysseus was woken by a great commotion. He searched for the source of the sound. He found himself before Achilles' stables. He opened up the doors. There were the wonderful white horses, rearing up in the air, kicking the air with their front legs, kicking at their stalls with their back legs, rolling their great eyes, snorting.

5 Odysseus harnessed them to a chariot. They took him out of the camp, out across the blasted battlefield, until he was near the walls of Troy – to an ancient olive grove. Odysseus climbed down. He made his way from behind one tree to the next until he found a girl, a Trojan girl, kneeling in the grass, weeping, her shoulders shaking. And, in front of her, lying, stretched out, lifeless – the body of Achilles! Achilles was dead!

10 He pushed her away. He gathered up the body back into the chariot and back to the Greek camp.

“Achilles is dead! Achilles is dead!” The great bronze Scaean gates of the city were thrown open and the people followed Paris across the plain to the olive grove. But there was no sign of Achilles. There was only Polyxena, sobbing and sobbing and sobbing and looking at the ring  
15 on her finger as it dribbled blood down the back of her hand, down her arm and the blood was dripping from her elbow onto the earth.

By the time King Odysseus returned to the Greek camp, everyone was awake. They followed him with flaming torches from the gates to the gathering place. He lifted the slight body of Achilles out of the chariot and laid it in the mud and the men around him gasped.

20 He looked serene in death. All through his life Achilles’ face had been twisted with passion, with worry and care. But now all those passions were gone. It was as though he was asleep.

As they feasted on his beauty, his mother came from the sea, her face shrouded in a veil. She scooped up the body of her son and, as though he was still alive, as though he was a little boy who could not sleep, she rocked him. She sang to him.

25 The men went back to their huts. They left mother and son alone together. She burned his body.

And, as Thetis watched the flames rise up, she thought of her wedding day, the happiest day of her life. How full of hope she’d been! She thought of all the wonderful wedding gifts: the spear, the golden breastplate, the wonderful ring, the four white horses, the ant warriors...

30 and then she remembered the last gift. And she walked to Achilles’ hut and there inside in the corner, squatting, gathering shadows, there it was, the gift of the god of the dead. A black urn. Inlaid in silver across its front, a picture, an image of three goddesses, the three Fates. The first who spins out the thread of a life, the second who measures out the life’s length and the third who cuts it.

35 She picked up the urn. She found the ashes of Patroclus and put them in. She went outside. Now the pyre was only glowing ashes, shining bones. She put those ashes and bones into the urn and mingled them with those of Patroclus. Then she walked out of the camp. She carried the urn, the ashes, out of the sight, out of the reach of any mortal man.

40 She buried it on a headland that overlooks the sea. And, when she had finished, she said, “My dear child, not for you the stretching shadow, not for you the ripening grape, not for you the joy of children. You chose glory.”