

Pentecost 8
30/7/2006

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 15:1-15

Psalm 14

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1 - 15

A king like no other

In Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* a young man, Raskolnikov, has a belief that leaders such as Napoleon and Alexander the Great are above moral standards. Even murder, committed for the good of society, is justified. This is Dostoyevsky's essay on the temptation of rulers, great and small.

The prophet Samuel knew the moral and spiritual dangers of monarchy. Once in place he knew the king would be tempted to forgo being a servant of God and begin to live according to different rules. Unlike the saintly picture of the leaders of Israel found in Chronicles, Samuel gives us a “warts and all” account, especially of the kings. In this respect nothing exposes the feet of clay of Israel’s leader more than the story of David’s dealings with Bathsheba and Uriah.

It is spring-time - the season of new life. It is also the season for war, because supporting the troops in the field is easier then. David the Philistine slayer now has an army to fight for him, so he stays in Jerusalem. While at rest from the front David does not dream up better social service schemes. Samuel had earlier warned that kings are takers and David is no exception. He sees what he wants: Uriah’s wife Bathsheba. He already had wives, but did not pause to consider the finer ethical points of the matter. Like rulers all over the world, then and now, he figured he could impose his will to suit himself. Neither law, nor the will of God counts here. David swiftly claims what he desires, and when Bathsheba signals she is pregnant, it triggers even worse behaviour.

David’s attempt to cover his tracks brings to light the character of Uriah the Hittite. He is a foreigner who has become ritually observant according to Israel’s faith. He does not go down to his house to be with his wife during war. For the sake of king and country he maintains the discipline of the soldier and keeps himself apart.

Next comes an attempt to weaken Uriah’s resolve through getting him drunk. But even then David cannot command Uriah’s dedication. In the final act Uriah is like a traveller in whose luggage someone has planted drugs or a bomb. He carries his own death warrant to Commander Joab who is the perfect political hatchet man and follows orders without scruple. This is war. Uriah dies as planned.

David’s initial sin is not heroic - his fallibility did not enmesh him in a significant entanglement for the sake a new political alliance. This was a trivial intrigue - like events in the Whitehouse ten years ago. But it escalated into something far beyond even its savage and evil outcome. At the end of the story (beyond our text) David takes the trouble to say to Joab: **Do not let this matter trouble you... do not let it be evil in your eyes.** David has become the moral arbiter. He believes he can instruct his

servants in what to believe about right and wrong. This is not servant leadership. It is hierarchy and patriarchy and sexism, all rolled into one. And it is Godless.

In this affair David set himself against the whole moral tradition of his people. The law of Israel allowed for killing in war. But this was murder; malicious, cunningly contrived and cynically executed. Uriah's death was born of the dark necessity of royal power unchecked by Word, or Law or conscience. David's behaviour pales beside the faithfulness of his servant Uriah. But the deepest judgement falls because he has tried to refashion the concept of good and evil to suit himself. His action does not square with the reality of the covenant God made with the forefathers.

What Samuel intends us to see is not the sexual sin but the sense that as king, David believed he could make the rules to suit himself, regardless of the covenant. As we look at the world at the moment there are many resonances with this text. People are not being treated equally, justly or fairly. Violence abounds, and leaders of governments on all sides are running rampant, making the rules to suit themselves - as in announcing "any civilians remaining in Southern Lebanon will be treated as friends of Hezbollah!" Well can we see the depths to which corruption can go. David's **do not let it be evil in your eyes** is ultimately cynical. In one who was a servant of God, it is actually atheism in practice.

It is hard for us to embrace the shadow cast by this story, but biblical history manages to live with it. When we read the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew one of the many strange things that occur is that "the wife of Uriah" features there. The history of salvation in the world includes these people, and these events. God is not afraid to embrace the shadow, and from even these dark places brings light. God also guards the continuity promised to David, and translates it into a new code. Through David's line God offers an entirely new attempt to define the concept of kingship - giving us a fresh start. Not by power of sword or spear, or political intrigue, but by suffering service does God seek to resolve the past and offer us a future.

There is a kingship theme in today's Gospel. The people are enthused over Jesus, David's heir, and want to make him king. Jesus flees. The crowd's misplaced messianic feeling is not for him. At the coming Passover he will serve as a shepherd king and embody what it means to live in the sovereignty of God. In the mean time he leaves clues to go on. Where David established the city of Jerusalem, Jesus came to light in out of the way Bethlehem: the house of bread. Where David exploited Bathsheba for his own ends, Jesus gave women the dignity of respect and place, showing that the covenant God made with the world extends to all, regardless of sex, gender or status. Where David killed the poor man in order to steal his wife, Jesus takes the humble food of the poor, barley loaves and fish, and feeds the people until they are satisfied. And in a link with springtime, he seats them on the green grass. Here are the verdant pastures where the Good Shepherd feeds the sheep. He preached that the reign of God was at hand, but this did not equate with hierarchy, patriarchy or sexism, or with him claiming glory for himself. And when he was put on trial, while the people shouted that they had no king but Caesar, he reminded Pilate where the real power came from. He was not conquered by the power of death. Instead, by entering into it fully, he conquered death's power over us.

According to the Gospels the worst we could do did not eradicate God's commitment to us. God' work for our salvation is ongoing. There is no shadow dark enough to keep us

from the light, which is why we continue to retell and celebrate these stories in ritual and song. Gathered here as we are, we stand for the fact that the way to life is found by living according to a different sovereignty. One which, in manner, life and response overturns every notion of what kingship normally means. We come here to feed our hearts and minds on the stories of grace and humility given to us in him. And here, in repentance, we acknowledge how easily we are seduced - by our desires, and the lies and deceit of those who reign today with duplicity and ruthlessness similar to David.

But notice this. What Jesus brings surpasses what can be provided from human resources. His is an inexhaustible source of nourishment. At this table we are served with the imperishable promise of salvation. On this deep and permanent grace we are called to feed, and live.

Thanks be to God.