

Pentecost 9
2/8/2009

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

Psalm 51

Ephesians 4:1-16

John 6:24– 35

Sermon preached by Rev. Robert Gribben

God did not want a monarchy. Or so the First Book of Samuel tells us, as it describes the ageing judge and prophet Samuel caving into the pleas of the wandering tribes who formed the children of Israel at that ancient point. A king will cost you, said Samuel: you will all be dragooned into the royal enterprise, you, your sons, your wives and daughters, your households, will all pay for the protection a king will supply. Chapter 8 of 1 Samuel is notable for its constant use of the verb ‘take’, and it plays a major role in today’s Old Testament story, which demonstrates that God was right. (Mind you, several people have had a go at these ‘historical’ books, so there are other views in the very text; but even the Qu’ran records Samuel’s opposition.) He then anointed Saul. All this is preparation for the story of the real hero of these books, the shepherd boy king and giant-slayer David, whom God loved and appointed as his vice-regent. The scene is therefore set for the great fall of the mighty. Quite the most astonishing thing about this national history is that it *remembers* how David failed his God and his people. History is written by the victors, they say; but somehow David’s editors did not delete this shocking truth. It is very important for us that they did not. We need this story.

The lectionary has divided this story up into two parts, so I am pleased that John did not concentrate on it last week! So having left off with David’s nasty deeds, we pick up the tale again. Let me remind you of last week’s reading.

The scene was set with startling brevity.

In the springtime of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers with him; they ravaged the Ammonites...but David remained at Jerusalem.

There it is: the stupidity of war – which waits for good weather and still does. The fact is that this king no longer led the troops out. While others continue to rid the world of Ammonites, the king finds idle time on his palace rooftop. The scene is set for mischief, and she soon appears one terrace down the hill, bathing after her period. That’s not an unimportant fact. Not a word is wasted in this account: if our ancestors bowdlerized this story, this generation at least knows how sex works – though it is no wiser than its ancestors in the face of its extraordinary power. The place of women in that society is also spelled out, or rather, is not: she is Bathsheba, but she is defined as ‘daughter of Eliam, wife of Uriah the Hittite’, by the men who owned her. And this king, the supreme commander at leisure while others do the work, *takes* – there’s the verb – *takes* Bathsheba. That is what kings do, what all people in power, do. The act is over in an instant; it is the consequences that take time.

In verse 5 she speaks for the first time. *Harah 'anoki*. 'I am pregnant'. It is not the first time those words have stopped a conversation. They are enough to give a king pause. David does not pause for long. She actually asks for nothing. He knows the matter needs sorting.

Then follow two of the nastiest episodes in holy writ, two sly, calculated betrayals. First David summons his soldier, Uriah, and gives him a man-to-man, chieftain to warrior, conversation about how the battle is going. Again, man-to-man, he suggests that Uriah go home before the next skirmish and – 'wash his feet'. It does not take the wisdom of a schoolboy to read what that means; it is an old Hebrew euphemism, but in any case, this plain soldier doesn't bother with such subtleties: he asks how a man under orders could go home and 'lie' with his wife when even the holiest of holies of their God was enshrined in a tent (the Ark), and likewise his commander and companions in the field? Uriah is the epitome of military loyalty and fair play. So David's idea of covering up the obvious obstetric calculation is thwarted. The baby is going to be seen as a vacation dalliance, and the media will have a heyday.

So the second stratagem is tried: David gets Uriah drunk – and presumably sexy, though that has been known to fail. Uriah bunks down by the palace, and Bathsheba sleeps alone.

So then the final solution. The king, this apple of God's eye, orders his victim to take his own death sentence by letter to his commander at the front. So far, this foreigner, this Hittite, is clearly a more noble man than the royal son of the Torah. Joab knows what to do with such orders, and Uriah is 'taken out', as the modern phrase goes, a casualty of war. People are used to telling lies about wars. It was perfected in Vietnam. But the king's problem is solved.

The result is told swiftly. After lamenting her husband's death, Bathsheba (still referred to in the text as 'the wife of Uriah') is *taken* by David in marriage, and their child is born. But the narrator now comes to his point: 'the thing that David had done displeased the LORD'. But no bolt of lightning strikes from the heavens; God sends Nathan to the king.

The parable we heard today needs no re-telling. David is so shocked that he seems to take it as a report. The tale commands his full attention. It takes very few words to describe the rich man; but the story of the poor man with one little ewe lamb, who was like a daughter to him, is told tenderly and at length. The rich man 'takes', even what *lies in his neighbour's bosom* (!). The righteous king fulminates against the injustice as you would expect any protector of the nation's morals to do. He gives judgement against the rich man in forceful terms.

Thus the word of God is able to strike like a two-edged sword: Nathan says just two Hebrew words: *Attah ha'ish*: 'You are the man.' Nathan's homily is terrible to hear, because it is simply true. David is faced with all his crimes. In the face of God's personal nurture, guidance, protection. He has broken three commandments at once: against killing, adultery, and coveting. He has taken what is not his with impunity. No wonder David says, 'I have sinned against the LORD'. The psalm we sang today claims to be his full confession.

He need not have been so penitent, of course. In the biblical context, Nathan could have been dragged away in chains to be seen no more: it has happened before and since. But David does repent, and that takes moral courage and insight. He receives mercy but must live on as the consequences of his actions are played out. The death of Bathsheba's baby is merely the first of a series of tragedies – betrayal, murder, deceit, misuse of power, greed – which marks the life of all his sons, from Solomon onwards. The sword indeed never disappears from David's line.

The compilers of the books of Samuel and of Kings see this story as a pivotal point in the history of Israel, as a moment of revelation as to the nature of human beings, and of God. It is a lesson in how to speak of 'the kingdom of God', for God trusted this king with great things, and when David fell, much fell with him. Nathan's accusation is chiefly about sheer ingratitude. One of the signs of the kingdom of God is that it is based on gratitude, on grateful behaviour, on a eucharistic ethic – that is, a *thankful* way of dealing with oneself and other people. It is about giving, not taking. It is about living under grace. One commentator says that the 2 Samuel story is a powerful cry for the bread of truth to be available for all, the strong and the weak, the powerful and the marginalized, the citizen and the stranger, a plea for fair-dealing, for honest relationships.

And in today's Gospel, John sets out the teaching of Jesus: 6: 33: 'For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world'. This latter day son of David is God's gift to the world – as the best known verse in that Gospel has it – 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life'.
