

Pentecost 10
5/8/2012

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 11:26 – 12:13a
Psalm 32
Ephesians 4:1 - 16
John 6:24 – 35

Sermon preached by Rev Dr Morag Logan

The story we have heard from Samuel for the last two weeks reads like a scenario for a misconduct hearing, and in such a hearing none of the characters would come off very well - David and Joab as the principal villains, Bathsheba the ambiguous victim, and even God might earn a reprimand.

David's case would not take long. His misconduct is obvious and painful to read about, just as clear and as outrageous is his abuse of power in attempting to cover-up his wrongdoing, his misuse of military power to accomplish the murder of Uriah.

Joab we can dispose of almost as quickly. No doubt he would try the Nuremberg defence of "just following orders" and covering for the boss. The text, it seems, is easier on him than we would be today.

Before we come to Bathsheba and indeed to God, though, we need to reflect on the place of this story. It is a story that is told in retrospect. Its hearers knew of the story that would unfold in subsequent chapters, the civil war among David's children, and particularly the succession of Solomon, Bathsheba's son.

Looking at that longer story Bathsheba is not quite the bereft victim of her king's lust. I'm not saying that I see her as the "seductress" that some interpreters do. I don't see any grounds for seeing her in this light, and I don't think that anything that she says and does can be used to mitigate the enormity of David's abuses, however she is an ambiguous character.

She is taken by David – but utters no word of protest. She, in the end, benefits from the events, benefits from her husband's death by becoming one of the wives of the king. More than this, she clearly becomes a centre of power in the court, and in the nation. It is her son, Solomon, who becomes the king of Israel after David. Solomon is not the first son of David. He is also not the youngest son. Although there is something of a pattern in Israel of God preferring the youngest son, the least of the sons (think of David himself, of Joseph, of Jacob . . .) this does not seem to be the case here.

Bathsheba is not David's first wife, or his last wife, oldest or youngest. She is not the best connected politically either – at the start of the story she married to a foreigner (Uriah the Hittite) who is a common soldier in David's army. She does not come from royalty and power, she does not come with the connections of a Michal – daughter of Saul – or and Abigail, with connections tribe leadership.

The succession of Solomon, son of Bathsheba to the throne is a mystery – some call this section of the history the “succession narrative” and see the question of how Solomon became king the whole point of this story-telling. That’s a bit of a limited understanding, I think, as I think that there is much more to this text than just an explanation of Solomon’s succession – but it is clear throughout the whole history of Israel that you do not become king without a powerful mother, and that the mother of the king is one of the most powerful figures at the court. There is something about Bathsheba that enabled her to rise to power. Now I don’t think that she brought about her husband’s death, planned David’s actions, plotted to make it happen – but she certainly had a desire for power, and seized the chance that came her way, she certainly benefitted from the death of her husband.

And how would God fare in our ethics inquiry?

This is probably the most uncomfortable to examine. God here is portrayed as punishing David. David himself is not to die, but the first son that Bathsheba bears to him is to die as a punishment for David, and the ongoing punishment of David unfolds in the next chapters of this book of Samuel, and it is portrayed here as being God’s punishment of David.

The story is an unfolding tragedy. It involves rape of one of David’s daughters by one of his sons, and it continues in Absalom’s revolt against his father – a revolt that leads to the kingdom teetering on the brink of civil war, which is ended by Joab – who is no longer “following orders” at all – bringing about Absalom’s death.

David's punishment, it seems, involves a lot of collateral damage. We cannot conceive of a god who punishes like this, sacrificing so many lives to make sure David gets the moral point.

I don’t hold that this story is told to show us how God punishes, but I do think that it is telling us, showing us, how the evil that people do inevitably has consequences. It has consequences for ourselves, but often and tragically it has consequences for others, and for the community in which we live. David takes women, seems to regard the women around him as a prize or a trophy. Others, his sons in particular, learn and follow this behaviour, live it out in their own lives, turning against their father, taking David’s women.

David has great skill in war, in battle. He uses this to bring himself to power, he uses it to achieve personal ends – his sons (and others around him) also become military experts, and use this skill against their brothers, against David himself. People will inevitably do as we do, not as we tell them to do, and the evil of one person can spread and hurt others, can hurt the individual themselves. This, I think, is an understanding that this whole sad story is placing before us.

This story can function for us in all of its complexity, in much the same way that Nathan’s much briefer, simpler story functions for David. Nathan’s story is a story that works here because in the telling of it David is at first just a hearer, then is open to see himself, his actions afresh. He hears a story of injustice and hurt, and responds with the basic response of seeking justice and restoration in the little situation that Nathan puts before him.

He is able to continue to respond and recognize truly how this parable applies to himself. This response, responsiveness does not change the consequences. But it does bring David to a point where he can see truly who he is and what he has done, a place where he is able to hear a word of grace. And his story, the story of God's people did not end here. Through all of the pain and horror, God continued to walk with his people, calling them to the same sort of recognition as there was for David, and God calls to us in the same way.

Yes, our lives are different – as David's life was different to that of the rich man taking the poor man's lamb. Nonetheless, in the patterns established in this story, we can see our own lives and our own patterns. In the powerful seizing things and exploiting people because they can; in people who are "just following orders;" in people who perhaps do no active evil, but seize opportunities that come their way from the evil of others; in those who learn, appropriate destructive patterns of behaviour from those around them, and carry this into later generations – in all of this we can see parts of ourselves, can see our world.

It is only in this painful hearing, in this painful recognition of ourselves in this that will we be able to hear the stories with power for us, then and only then can we experience the possibilities, the hope for change and renewal, in the word from God. It is only in this way that we can hear with powerful impact that the story does not end; that evil is not the end of the story, or the whole story; that God walks with us, with our world and our brokenness, and into this broken world is always calling us to account, always speaking a word of grace:

Your sins are forgiven

Thanks be to God.
