Sermon for 15th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: 2 Samuel 6:1-5,12b-19; Ephesians 1:2-14; Mark 6:14-29

I

Three kings confront us in our readings today: David; Herod Antipas; Jesus (indirectly at least). All exercise power as kings did in those days – having power over life and death for their subjects: Each of them spilling blood in the exercise of their rule.

David rises to power by spilling the blood of Goliath and his final act in coming to the throne in 2 Samuel 5 is the execution of Recab and Baruch, two assassins who had just killed Saul’s remaining son, Ish-Bosheth, presumably in order to curry favour with David who would then ascend the throne unopposed. So David’s reign was built on blood, but you might allow that much of that was done in battle and he had killed only those whom he had to kill. Later, David would spill the innocent blood of Uriah by arranging his death in battle in order to gain access to his wife, Bathsheba.

Herod Antipas, the would-be king of the Jews, rules with his brothers in a tetrarchy after the death of his father, Herod the Great. Like his father before him, Antipas shed innocent blood as a matter of routine. He knew that John the Baptist was right to condemn his marriage to Herodias, who was both his sister-in-law and his niece, if you can work that one out! But with too much wine and bravado at his birthday party, he made a foolish promise from which he couldn’t extricate himself without a huge loss of face. So, despite fearing the consequences of putting a well-known holy man to death, and a man he found interesting himself, he ordered John the Baptist’s execution.

Jesus, by contrast, sheds only his own blood. On the one occasion we know about when one of his disciples pulls a sword and inflicts injury on an opponent in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus commands he put the sword away and heals the wounded man, despite him being an enemy (Luke 22:51). The only pomp and ceremony of Jesus the king was a crown of thorns and a reed for a sceptre. Instead of dealing out death, Jesus restored the dead to living. The kingdom that knows no end, in time or geography, was founded by a king who exercised love rather than brutality; who stood for justice, rather than self-interest; who turned the other cheek, rather than send his followers to fight and kill for him.

All three kings exercised power in their various ways, but it is only the power of Jesus that continues to this day. Jesus’ gentle, self-sacrificing power still attracts people across the world to willingly offer their loyalty and service.

ii

We can also see a stark contrast between the three kings regarding their concept of religion.

David started out as a morally pure young man, and even as he rose through the ranks of Saul’s army, he retained much of his sense of moral justice. When he ascended to the throne, he sought to bring religious faith into the very heart of his political power-base by having the ark of the covenant brought into Jerusalem – the episode recounted in today’s first reading.

But the holiness David sought to establish at the heart of his kingdom was even then seeping from his heart. Power quickly went to David’s head. His first move towards his new capital city had been accompanied by taking a large number of concubines and wives (2 Sam 5:13). His marriage to one of Saul’s daughters, Michal, was already going downhill before this.

We then have this strange and slightly tasteless story about David getting a bit too excited and carried away by dancing provocatively in front of all the people, notably slave girls, as his wife is not slow to point out once he gets home (2 Sam 6:20). Like so many other powerful men, David falls prey to his sexual desires. Later in his reign, he lusts after Bathsheba whom he espies taking a bath from the palace ramparts and arranges for her husband, Uriah, to be killed in battle so he can have her.

On the other side of the ledger, David is known for the many beautiful psalms which he composed. Like the rest of us, David was a mixture of good and noble sentiments and reprehensible lusts and selfishness.

Herod Antipas had his better, more humane side we mustn’t forget. He was strangely attracted by John the Baptist and enjoyed listening to him, even if that would have been an uncomfortable experience much of the time. He obviously found John’s religious zeal curiously attractive. Perhaps there was a better man inside Herod trying to get out?

However, the balance of the ledger was certainly on the malign side for Antipas. He divorced his first wife so that he could take the younger Herodias and it is hinted here that he also lusted after Herodias’ young daughter, Salome, who danced in front of him. I think we are intended to hear those unsavoury undertones.

Wheat and tares growing side by side; it’s true of each and every one of us and it’s often sex or money that prove our undoing. It is traditional to think David has more in his favour than against him, but can that be said when we know he has committed murder? How many psalms balance a murder and adultery? David killed Uriah gladly to satiate his desire – whereas Antipas killed the Baptist reluctantly because he had boxed himself into a corner.

“All we like sheep have gone astray”, says Isaiah (Isaiah 53:6); “There is no one righteous, not even one,” laments St Paul many years later (Romans 3:10). Such sentiments are not well received in today’s hedonistic western society and barely anyone has a good word to say about Augustine’s gloomy assessment of humankind, but there’s still enough truth in the observation to make us in need of a saviour.

Jesus, by contrast, is the lamb that is pure and without sin. He comes to call forth the best that is in us and to forgive and help us suppress the worst. Paul praises the gracious gift of redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ through which we have forgiveness for our sins.

Paul’s insistence on the cross of Jesus is important, for it underlines the seriousness of human sin. If God is good and just then it is not an option for God to simply declare that the murders committed by David and Antipas simply don’t matter. They have to matter. Justice demands that they and all other heinous sin and suffering inflicted on the world by sinful and selfish people matters deeply to God. It is only because God has ‘lavished’ us with grace that our sins are forgiven (Ephesians 1:8).

Nothing less than a lavish measure of grace would do – because however unpopular it is to speak of sin and evil, they really do matter and only God is able to do something about this state of affairs – which God has graciously done for us in Christ who has restored heaven and earth and brought all things together under the Lordship of the gentle, self-sacrificing king who knew no crown but one of thorns and no sceptre but a simple reed.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**June 2017**