

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield
12th of July, 2009

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

Psalms 24

Mark 6:14-29

Just like last week's readings, this week's readings seem to be a case of 'compare and contrast'. Last week we heard about David being made king over all Israel and Judah; then taking the stronghold of Zion in Jerusalem and making it into the city of David. Last week's psalm was about the glory and strength of Zion. Strength and victory and celebration. But last week's gospel and epistle readings talked of rejection and weakness. Jesus was rejected by the people of his home town of Nazareth; and Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the thorn in his flesh, the weakness that God had given him.

In this week's reading David is still at the beginning of his reign, victorious and successful. Today we see him bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. I'm going to assume that you know all about the Ark of the Covenant from *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but just in case, for some strange reason, you haven't seen the movie, the ark was a box that held the copy of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel and the tablets of the law given to Moses. It symbolised the divine presence and God's blessing. David has established Jerusalem as his capital, and now he brings God's symbolic presence to the city, with riotous celebration; celebration so riotous, in fact, that one of David's wives despises him when she sees the way he leaps and dances. Today's psalm, in response to this story, is about the King of Glory entering the gates and the celebration of those who ascend the hill of the Lord. Again, the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures are about strength and victory and celebration.

Then we come to today's gospel reading. And it's a very strange one. The tale of the beheading of John the Baptist is the longest story in Mark's gospel about anyone other than Jesus, and Jesus doesn't really appear in it. It's almost a folktale, with the king who makes a rash vow that he has to fulfil against his will. It's also a tale of sexual and political intrigue; with Herodias' anger at John's condemnation of her marriage and the girl's dance that leads to Herod offering her anything she wants. At the end we have the horrible image of the head of John the Baptist being brought in on a platter; John's death is one of the 'courses' at the banquet. This particular biblical story is R-rated.

There are flaws in Mark's history. Herod was not a king, but a tetrarch, and couldn't have offered anyone half of the kingdom that he held as a client of Rome. The brother whose wife he married was also called Herod, not Phillip. The girl who danced would have been the daughter of Herodias, but not of Herod; and we don't know her name, although Mark describes her as Herod's daughter Herodias. And Mark's explanation of why John was killed differs from that of the historian Josephus, who says that Herod had John killed for political reasons, because Herod was afraid that his popularity might lead to a rebellion.

Mark tells a different story, not concerning himself with the historical facts, because for Mark this is not a story of history and politics. This is a story of theology and prophecy, in which John stands up for the Torah, condemns Herod for breaching the Levitical code, and dies because he speaks the truth to power. Mark's first readers, like us, knew that someone else had been unlawfully executed for standing up for God's truth in the face of worldly power. Just as John the Baptist has gone to his death, so will Jesus.

The story of the death of John the Baptist foreshadows the death of Jesus. As John went, so Jesus will go. John is killed by a ruler who recognises that he is a righteous man, but who gives in to public pressure: "The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her". This scenario will be played out again with Jesus and Pilate: "Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!'" So Pilate,

wishing to satisfy the crowd ... handed [Jesus] over to be crucified.”¹ This tale of the beheading of John the Baptist is a terrible story because of the machinations of power and the structures of injustice it displays, and because we know that the same injustice and power will lead to Christ’s crucifixion.

There’s also a connection between John the Baptist and the disciples who follow Jesus. This story of John’s murder is sandwiched between Jesus sending the twelve out on mission, and their successful return. The disciples are riding high on the power of Jesus’ healings, teachings and miracles. When he sent them out, as we heard last week, Jesus warned the disciples to expect rejection. But just in case they, and we, didn’t get it, while they’re on mission we are told this tale of the murder of John the Baptist. The first mission of the Twelve is connected to John’s death; just as the beginning of Jesus’ ministry was linked to John’s arrest. John’s murder foreshadows not only Jesus’ death, but the later lives and deaths of the Twelve – and Christian tradition tells us that most of the Twelve were martyred. As followers of Jesus, the disciples are called to share in his destiny. And not just Jesus’ original disciples. The murder of John the Baptist foreshadows the deaths of many Christians right up to the present.

When I hear the word “martyr” and imagine people killed for their faith, I tend to think of those like Peter and Paul, killed in Rome in the first century. But in 1998, ten statues were unveiled at Westminster Abbey in London. The statues were of ten twentieth-century martyrs, people killed because of religious persecution and oppression in the last century. At the time the Rev Dr Anthony Harvey, sub-dean of Westminster, told the congregation: “There has never been a time in Christian history when someone, somewhere, has not died rather than compromise with the powers of oppression, tyranny and unbelief. But our century, which has been the most violent in recorded history, has created a roll of Christian martyrs far exceeding that of any previous period.”

Two of the statues in Westminster are of two of my personal heroes: Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer; and Baptist pastor and civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King.

Bonhoeffer was born in Germany in 1906 and was eventually hanged in a Nazi concentration camp in 1945 at the age of 39, not much older than I am now. Bonhoeffer was a theologian, but when Hitler came to power in 1933 he abandoned his academic career. In 1934 he was one of the group of clergy, theologians and church members who declared that only the scriptures, and not the Nazi Government, had authority over the church. They signed the Barmen Declaration, drafted by the Swiss Reformed church theologian Karl Barth, and became the Confessing Church, as opposed to the German Christians who supported the government. Bonhoeffer then became director of an illegal seminary for the Confessing Church. In 1939 he was in America, but felt that he had to return to Germany when war broke out, because he would have no right to help rebuild Germany after the war if he didn’t participate in its sufferings during the war. He was part of the resistance against Hitler and he was executed for it.

Dr Martin Luther King, as I’m sure you know, was a pastor of the African-American Baptist church, and it was his faith led him to struggle for civil rights. He led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the March on Washington in 1963 where he made his “I have a dream” speech. King was awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. He was assassinated in 1968, also at the age of 39.

Two pastors, killed in the twentieth century in the Christian countries of Germany and the United States, because they sought to follow Jesus to the best of their ability in their time and place. Our faith is probably never going to put us in danger of death. In this time and place, Australia in the early years of the twenty-first century, we can admire the commitment of those whose faith leads them to death without worrying that we’ll be called to imitate them. But just in case we think that being disciples of Jesus means living easy and peaceful lives, that being Christian means safety and security, here in the middle of the first successful mission of the Twelve, while everyone is talking about Jesus’ preaching and teaching and healings, we are given the story of John the Baptist.

¹ Mark 15:14-5.

We follow a God who was crucified. We have been baptised into his death. This is not something that is easy to contemplate, and the only way we can contemplate it is by remembering the rest of the story. We have been baptised into Jesus' death, and also into his life. Crucifixion is followed by resurrection. We remember Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King and John the Baptist because in their death they have shown us what it truly means to live. And because we know, as they knew, that whether we live or whether we die we belong to God. Amen.