

A Pair of Kings

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

Being a good Christian won't win a person a lot of popularity contests. Even being a good person has its challenges. In our scripture readings today we witness three different men who face a decisions between doing the right thing and doing the easy or popular thing, each with differing levels of success.

We can start with David, since the children have already helped me tell part of his story. This story actually begins many generations earlier, when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. For forty years, God's presence was visible to the Israelites: a pillar of cloud by day, fire by night. When Moses entered the Tabernacle to speak to God, God voice ushered, it is said, from the lid of the Ark, between the two gold cherubim. Wherever the Israelites went, the Ark of the Covenant went ahead of them. It was the visible presence of an invisible God, and the nation of Israel felt incomplete without it. Over time, the Israelites lost some of their reverence for God and their proper respect for the Ark. As a result, the Ark fell into the hands of the enemy, the Philistines. David later defeated the Philistines and took possession of the Ark once again, but the prophet Samuel did not allow the Ark to be returned to its rightful home in the tabernacle until Israel had once again become a nation of God. This was accomplished only after David had became King, first of Judah, then of Israel, reuniting the two once divided nations. The time had finally come for the Ark, Israel's most cherished possession and highest religious icon, to be returned to its rightful home, the Holiest of Holies, in the heart of the Tabernacle.

This is a big deal for David. It is an occasion for celebration. The presence of God would once again reside at the heart of the Israelite nation. So David, being the song writer, poet and man of God that he was, celebrates with as much enthusiasm and flourish as he can muster. And the faithful of Israel dance and sing and celebrate right along with their King.

But every party has a pooper, and in this case it was David's wife, Michal, who happened to be the daughter of Saul, who was king when the Ark was lost. To Michal, David's behavior was inappropriate for a King. A king should be solemn, stoic. A Jewish gentleman would never run, let alone dance. And instead of wearing his royal robes, David was dressed in the simple robes of a priest. In her eyes, it was all very unbecoming a King, a gentleman, and certainly, her husband. He should be ashamed of himself for being part of such a public spectacle. We can be assured that she is not the only person passing judgement on David's seemingly unseemly behavior. She is just the only one that the scripture writer mentioned.

David's response to her: "I was dancing for the Lord!" If my joy and celebration embarrasses you, that's your problem. No amount of scolding, nagging, or finger-wagging was going to keep David from doing what he believed to be right in the eyes of God.

Another shining example of doing right and paying the price comes to us in the person of John the Baptist. John's actions likewise earned him the disdain of a woman; another queen, if fact. But John paid a much higher price for his integrity. Herod Antipas was the Roman appointed governor of the region of Galilee. His brother, Phillip, was governor of the neighbouring region of Traconitis and Idumea. Herodias was originally married to Phillip, but left him for Herod. None of this would have been a big deal, if it hadn't been for John. John embarrassed this pseudo-royal couple by publicly accusing Herod and Herodias of adultery. Rather than admitting their wrongdoing and making things right, Herodias pressured Herod execute John in order to silence him. But Herod liked John. He recognized him as a good and holy man, and even thought the things John spoke to him about made him uncomfortable, he liked to listen to him speak. Keeping him

locked up prevented John from embarrassing him any further, but he stopped short of fulfilling his wife's wishes to have John killed. Perhaps there was still a hint of integrity in the ruler, after all.

At Herod's birthday party, though, it all came undone. Filled with too much food and wine, and trying to impress his guests, Herod allows himself to be backed into a corner. He is now faced with a choice: execute John, against his own wishes and better judgement, or face the embarrassment of breaking the vow he had publicly made to his daughter. In order to save face, he must murder a man whom he likes, a man who has done nothing wrong. It shouldn't have been a hard choice to make. He had been drinking. He had been conned. The vow to give his daughter half his kingdom if she requested it meant nothing anyway, since, as an appointed ruler of Roman Empire lands, he had no kingdom to give. It should have been an easy thing to say 'no.' But he didn't.

And he is wracked with guilt because of it. How else can we explain the fact that, when he heard of Jesus, teaching the people, healing the sick, driving out demons and performing miracles, he believed it was John, come back from the grave to haunt him? While he paid no direct price for his sins, we can see that he lived with the guilt and shame of what he had done. John, who had done everything right is killed, and Herod, who has done everything wrong, lives with a tortured spirit.

Integrity can bear a high price. But so can the lack of it. Occasionally, we may find ourselves in a no-win situation. How do we determine our response? How often does the easy way look different than the right way? How often does public opinion or peer pressure carry a heavier weight in our decision making than what we know to be the right thing?

Hopefully we are never faced with decisions of life and death, like Herod. But the questions apply just as readily to times when we may be called upon to name a wrong, or draw attention to an injustice. We tell our children that no one likes a tattler, and it's true. But where do we draw the line between tattling on someone for some innocent prank and identifying a wrong that someone has done and calling for justice? It isn't always an easy question to answer.

More often than we realize, instances arise in our lives that call for some action on our part. It may be an inappropriate joke that we are not comfortable with, but we laugh a little and tell ourselves no one has really been harmed. After all, it isn't like I told the joke? Perhaps we know of someone who is doing some wrong; cheating, stealing, abusing - but we say nothing and convince ourselves it isn't any of our business. Doing the right thing can be hard, and it is often easier to turn away and hope someone else will do something about it, that someone else will pay whatever cost may be associated with making things right.

As Christians, we are that someone else. Our faith calls us to right wrongs, to bring an end to injustice, to feed the hungry, house the homeless and free the oppressed. It is easy to imitate Donald Trump and say we have troubles of our own. Let the governments of third world nations look after their own. But can we say that to a 12 year old child in Nicaragua, who must pick through mountains of garbage in the hopes of finding something that will feed her family for a day.

Edmund Burke is quoted as saying "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good men to do nothing." As Christians, we are called to stand up against the triumph of evil, in whatever form it may manifest itself. If we act like Herod, and do what the world tells us is in our best interests, what would be most comfortable and easy in the short term, we face a very high cost in the long term, and that cost is shared by others who suffer as a result of our failing to do what our conscience tells us is right. Or we can be like John, and speak up and stand up, perhaps

pay the price for doing the right thing, but knowing that the reward for doing the will of our Creator is eternal.

The challenge is set before us to be as David, to honour and celebrate our faith, regardless of who may or may not approve, and to make it clear to all that we are people of God, not bashful or shy, but bold and forthright in our faith. We will place greater priority on being right with God than doing what is right in the eyes of men. It isn't always the easy road, but it is the road that leads us where we most want to go.

May God walk with us on that road, and bless us on our journey. Amen.

*Rev. Colin Snyder, MDiv.
July 15, 2018*