

Message for August 8, 2021

2 Samuel 12:1-9

During the past few months there has been intense speculation that there will be a federal election sooner rather than later. Some people welcome the prospect while others are less than happy. Whatever our feelings may be though, we should at least be thankful for one thing and that is that we do have the freedom to choose those who govern us. That we have this freedom is due to many people, one of whom is Oliver Cromwell.

The King of England at the time was Charles I, and he firmly believed that since he was the king, he had the right to do whatever he wanted to. In his view parliament had no real power and only existed to rubberstamp his decisions. Parliament however didn't see it that way and the upshot was the English Civil War when the royalists led by Charles, battled it out with the parliamentary forces led by Oliver Cromwell. Ultimately Parliament prevailed and their victory helped lay the foundation upon which our modern-day parliamentary democracy is built.

Not surprisingly, given his importance, it was decided that an official portrait of Cromwell should be made. Cromwell's face however was covered with disfiguring warts and the artist, wanting to make Cromwell look good, omitted them. Far from being pleased though, Cromwell was furious when he saw the painting. "Do it again", he roared, "Show me as I really am, warts and all!" And so it was done and the true likeness of Cromwell was preserved for posterity, warts and all.

I remembered this story as I thought about the background to today's scripture passage. On the one hand King David is such an admirable character; he stepped up and fought Goliath in single combat for example when no one else would. David also unified the twelve squabbling tribes to form a nation and then he established a dynasty that ultimately reached its pinnacle with the birth of the Messiah, Jesus himself. Truly David is an admirable man or, as the Bible puts it, he is "the man after God's own heart". And yet such is the fearless honesty of the Bible that it doesn't hesitate to portray a darker side of David too. If we don't think so, then all we have to do is remember the tragic scandal that led up to today's scripture passage.

One very hot day David went up to the flat roof of his palace to cool off, and when he looked down below he saw one of the most beautiful women that he had ever seen. She was having a bath on the rooftop of her own house. David asked who she was and was told that her name was Bathsheba and that she was married to one of his most loyal generals, Uriah the Hittite, who was away on a campaign. David ordered that Bathsheba be brought to him and the end result was that she became pregnant.

Now if this ever became public knowledge, the result would have been a major scandal and David's solution was to try and cover it up. He insisted that Uriah be brought home on leave, and once he was David proceeded to get him drunk. David then urged Uriah to go home and spend some time with his wife but instead Uriah decided to spend the night in the palace. When asked why he didn't go home, Uriah replied that he couldn't for two reasons. First of all, the religious laws made it clear that any soldier serving on a campaign couldn't have sexual relations lest he become unclean. Secondly, how could he, a general, go home and enjoy himself while the men he led were roughing it out on the battlefield? Uriah's refusal to go home left David in a very awkward spot. Since the unborn child could not be passed off as Uriah's, a more drastic step would have to be taken. Accordingly, Uriah was sent back to the fighting carrying a secret message for his commanding officer. The message ordered that Uriah be placed at the forefront of the fighting and then his men were to be pulled back, leaving him isolated and facing a certain death. All went according to plan too; Uriah died a hero and David married Bathsheba. A scandal was averted, or so David thought.

As today's scripture passage tells us, one day the prophet Nathan visited David and told him a disturbing story about two men, one of whom was very rich and the other very poor. The rich man had numerous flocks and herds while the poor man only had one little lamb that he loved and treated like a member of the family. One day the rich man had company whom he had to feed. Rather than kill one of his own animals though he took the poor man's lamb instead, and why not? He was rich. He was powerful. What did it matter if he took a poor nobody's only animal?

The story was obviously meant to get David's attention and it did. David was absolutely furious about the injustice of it all! Who did this rich man think he was? That is when Nathan sprung the trap and told David that the story was

really about him. “You are the man!” he proclaimed. Did David really think that he was going to get away with committing adultery with Bathsheba and then killing Uriah? Did David really think that just because he was the king, he could do whatever he wanted to, and that the rules and standards that applied to everyone else somehow didn’t apply to him? Well he could think again, said Nathan, because that’s not the way it works. In the eyes of God there isn’t one standard for the rich and powerful and another for everyone else. While we may not always realize it or appreciate it though, this is a truly radical and even revolutionary message.

Right after graduating from high school my father went to work for Goodyear. He joined the company at the very bottom in the mailroom and then did something that is probably impossible nowadays: he worked his way up the corporate ladder and eventually held a senior position. One of his responsibilities was the hiring, firing, and promotion of employees, and I have long remembered something he once told me. “If you want to ruin a good employee” he said, “give him or her an important sounding title”. What he meant by this was that all too often when a person was given such a title, it went to their heads. They started to think of themselves as being entitled to this or that, and that the rules and standards that applied to everyone else no longer applied to them. But this sort of thinking of course isn’t just to be found in the corporate world; we see this all the time with politicians, sports stars, and entertainment celebrities as well. It is easy enough to mock these people or get angry at them, but the truth is that if we are not careful, then all of us may sometimes be like them. It can be so easy and tempting to think that because of our jobs, education, ethnicity or whatever else, we are entitled to this or that and that the rules that apply to others somehow don’t apply to us. But while we may sometimes think this way, this certainly isn’t the way God does.

One of the most basic teachings of the Bible is that everyone is equal in the eyes of God and so, by implication, this is the way it should be in his church as well. St. James, the half-brother of Jesus, made this abundantly clear in his epistle when he harshly criticized a congregation for its practice of warmly welcoming and fawning over well-to-do visitors and escorting them to the best seats in the church, while at the same time telling their less well-off visitors to go and sit on a stool at the back. James insisted that this was totally wrong and a betrayal of Christ himself. The church and its members are called to love, and

love does not allow for partiality, distinctions, double standards, or a sense of entitlement. Indeed this is one of the things that makes the Residential Schools tragedy so disturbing and disheartening; that amongst other things the church did not live up to its own teachings and beliefs. Love was not shown, and partiality was. As more than one person has asked, would the churches have ever treated white children as they did the indigenous children?

Today's scripture passage has more than a whiff of scandal about it but one of the greatest principles of the Bible and even Christianity itself arises out of that sordid mess. We may sometimes make distinctions and reason that, as the old cliché puts it, "rank has its privileges", but that's certainly not how God sees it. In the eyes of God and ideally in the eyes of all his people, we are all equal. Indeed it is ironic that so many people like to think that we Christians are traditionalists and dedicated to keeping the status quo when the truth is that if we take the gospel seriously, we are really the greatest revolutionaries and radicals of all. If we don't think so, then why is it that totalitarian governments, whether they be communist or right wing, do their best to suppress, control and even better, eliminate the church altogether?

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we praise you and give you thanks for the wonderful gift of life and all that makes life so good and precious. We thank you for our loved ones, the food that nourishes our bodies, and all that nourishes our minds and souls. We thank you for the beauty of your creation and this summer season itself with its long, warm days. We thank you too for this nation in which we live, that even as we complain when things don't suit us or live up to our expectations, we are still so blessed when compared to so many of your children.

As we thank you and rejoice in life's good things, we remember and pray for all who have little cause to rejoice. We remember those in the West dealing with the massive forest fires and drought. We pray for all for whom the hot and humid weather is more than just an inconvenience but a threat to their health and well-being. We remember too those who are still coping with the ongoing

pandemic and the threat that it poses, not only to their livelihoods, but their very lives themselves. With this in mind, we pray for wisdom for those in positions of authority as we continue to move forward and attempt to return to some sense of normalcy.

We pray this day for the sake of healing for all who are ill, whether it be in mind, body, or soul.

We pray this day for all who have lost a loved one, that they may be comforted.

We pray this day for all those who feel worn down and even worn out, that they may be renewed and strengthened.

We pray this day for your loving presence in the lives of all those who are hurting, for as you know full well, life's pains and heartaches come in so many different forms.

We ask these things in your son's name. Amen.