



Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 25 July 2021

READINGS

2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

*“Create in me a clean heart O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.” – Psalm 51:10*

Our Old Testament reading this Sunday recounts the well-known story of David’s adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband Uriah. One might struggle to find a more sinister plot even amongst modern Hollywood scripts, bearing in mind that this story is over 2500 years old. It is clearly meant to be an indictment on David’s actions. He is not the “good guy” in this episode. From the outset we see David shirking his duties as king. Whereas he should be out leading his men in battle, David is whiling away time on his couch which affords him the opportunity to spy on Bathsheba late one afternoon as she is bathing.

Having impregnated Bathsheba through the adulterous affair that ensues, David tries to cover his tracks. He seeks, twice, to coerce Uriah to sleep with his wife hoping that Uriah would then believe the child to be his – problem solved. However, this unscrupulous behaviour on the part of David is contrasted by Uriah’s altruistic refusal of the comfort of his home and bed while his fellow soldiers are still out defending Israel. Plan B must be enacted. David conspires to kill Uriah and, with the help of his commander Joab, succeeds. The whole sordid episode is condemned not just in absolute terms but within the narrative. Nathan, the prophet, convicts and declares judgement on David with a parable. As a result, the child conceived by David and Bathsheba will die.

What are we to make of this story of David, among the most revered figures in ancient Judaism? Zion, a metaphorical term for God’s dwelling but really what was ancient Jerusalem, is also referred to as the City of David. The Messiah is meant to be a descendant of David. Undoubtedly, the height of the Kingdom of Israel was achieved with David at its helm. There are few figures as celebrated within the history of the Jewish faith. And yet here we have an episode in which David acts in a truly shocking and abominable way.

The story, in its entirety – that is, not just the incident, but the fate of David’s household as well as that of Israel in general – is one of redemption. It is one which illustrates God’s mercy and forgiveness, one which illustrates the grace of God. David’s actions are not thereby excused. On the contrary, there are consequences for David’s actions – a further life is lost. The judgement God issues through Nathan also suggests that part of David’s punishment is future dissent within his household. We know that the united kingdom lasted just one generation after David before the empire split into two.

There is, however, also contrition on the part of David. Some of the most well-known penitential Psalms – such as Psalm 51 – arise out of David’s experience of conviction and contrition. Solomon, the second child birthed to David and Bathsheba, went on to build the first Jewish temple, thereby extending his father’s legacy. God’s hand of blessing was not ultimately removed from David’s house and, if we ascribe to the traditional notion that the Messiah stands in David’s line, we see God’s blessing on David’s lineage culminating in the birth of Christ and in God achieving salvation for humanity. To quote the fourteenth century mystic, Julian of Norwich, “first the fall, then recovery from the fall, and both are the mercy of God,” suggests that, while we cannot deny our God-given agency and the ability to choose right from wrong, as God’s children, our lives are always in God’s hands. Our foibles and fumbles, and yes even our sometimes grave and knowing mistakes, are somehow used for our growth and learning and ultimately for God’s glory.

This is perhaps echoed in the story of the feeding of the five thousand. While the disciples are eager to send the crowds away that they may tend to their own needs, Jesus compels them to find a solution, using the little resources the crowds have at their disposal. The five loaves and two fish are not first magically produced by Jesus. Indeed, one could argue that the miracle could not have taken place without the presentation of these first. Without disputing or undermining the miraculous aspect of this story, it may also be read as a metaphor for our own Christian praxis and indeed as a template for how we live our lives.

Such potential was clearly illustrated this last week. Amidst the utter chaos and confusion we experienced as a country, one of the few rays of hope was the solidarity illustrated amongst community members as they banded together to protect their communities and clean up in the aftermath of the unrest. Solutions that are sought externally diminish our agency as human beings, making us passive and inert. The truth is that the overall trajectory of the Bible is one of redemption and grace. At least, that must be seen as the core of the Christian message. Christ suffers an unjust and cruel death at the hands of guilty men, but in so doing, achieves redemption and salvation for the human race. Today, we are being called, as agents of God’s salvation and as representatives of Christ, to participate in that salvation once more, bringing about God’s kingdom on earth.

Amen.