

Pentecost 7 – 11-07-21 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; **Psalm 24**; **Ephesians 1:1-14**; **Mark 6:14-29**

When I was growing up one of my mum's favorite radio programs was called Desert Island Discs. In the program a guest was interviewed about their life and they had to choose eight pieces of music, a book, and a luxury item that they would like to have with them if they were stranded on a desert island. So that guests didn't choose the same book it was assumed that they already had on the island a copy of the Bible and the complete works of William Shakespeare, but it was never explained how these came to be there!

It may seem strange to think that the complete works of Shakespeare would be something everyone would want to read, but Shakespeare has had an extraordinary impact on the English language so I guess that's why he was included. In his plays Shakespeare is credited with inventing many words that previously didn't exist. Exactly how many is argued fiercely by people who know these things, but the conservative estimate is at least four hundred and twenty with others suggesting up to one thousand seven hundred!

When I was at school it was compulsory to study a couple of Shakespeare plays and the story lines and speeches of these still roll around in my head all these years later. Imagine my delight when my youngest was tasked to read the tragedy of Macbeth and a book based on the play by the English author, David Hewson, and an American Professor of Shakespeare, called Andrew Hartley. I downloaded the book and listened to it in the car and it was fascinating to see how the plot of the play had been adapted in a novel.

Time was taken to establish the character of the principal players so that the reader or, in my case, the listener had the sense that Macbeth was a much respected Thane, who loved his wife and his life-long friend Banquo. In contrast the Scottish King Duncan was portrayed as a greedy, lecherous, and self-interested man, with sons of similar character. Lady Macbeth was given the name, Skeena, and time is taken to describe her as a woman who loved her husband, grieved the loss of her only child, and longed to live somewhere other than Inverness!

Staying true to the original plot, terrible choices are made by principal characters who were influenced by futures described to them by three wild sisters. These three sisters kept cropping up in the novel and were very creepy indeed! Macbeth and Skeena kill Duncan; Macbeth arranges for his friend Banquo to be killed after Banquo asks for his son to be named as heir to the throne; and then Macbeth's steward kills Macduff's wife and children. It is a grim and gruesome tale that suggests greed for power, no matter how it is justified, leads to increasingly complex moral compromise, destruction, and despair.

The Gospel reading this week is similarly gruesome and offers similar insight. King Herod Antipas had imprisoned John the Baptist because John had said publicly that Herod's marriage to his brother's wife was adulterous. It's interesting that Herod had not killed John, but Herod was 'greatly perplexed' by the things John said, and 'liked to listen to him.' The inference could be that Herod knew John spoke uncomfortable truth but was unwilling to do anything about it.

In a world that slips easily into polarities we might think that Macbeth was evil, and Macduff was good; Herod was evil, and John the Baptist was good. Black and white; light and dark; good and evil; them and us... are familiar polarities that often need nuance. For, surely there is a self-interested and amoral element within each of us, as well as one that is generous and

moral? The challenge is to make wise and generous choices, and for this to become so often that it becomes what we do and who we are.

However, the Gospel writer tells us that for Herod there was a party, and presumably enough alcohol consumed for recklessness. There was a sensational dance... and a rash promise made before powerful people. There was a horrific demand from a person who had been shamed, and an unwillingness from Herod to admit that he'd made a mistake. Then... there was the murder of an innocent man and the burial of his headless body by those who loved him. Shakespeare could have done great things with this text!

We are not kings like Macbeth or Herod... but, if we're brutally honest we often make choices which compromise what we believe to be right. Small indulgences can become unhealthy addictions, and even small acts of unkindness can grow to become indifference or cruelty. Is it too much to suggest that when such compromises go unchecked it will not be our head on a platter, but rather our integrity and conscience?

We are not abandoned in this task of living moral, compassionate, and generous lives. Our intellect enables helpful reflection, and God's Spirit is available to give guidance, insight, and courage when we pray. In our corporate worship we have opportunity to acknowledge that we fall short of the ideal and have need for forgiveness and recalibration.

If only Macbeth and Herod had had opportunity to reflect on their lives with a wise third party, and thoughtfully pray the words of the confession we so often say in our worship without thinking. Macbeth and Herod did not... but we do! Here's how it goes:

Merciful God, our maker and our judge,
We have sinned against you in thought, and word, and deed,
and in what we have failed to do:
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves;
we repent, and are sorry for our sins.
Father forgive us.
Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

I think there is brutal honesty in this that can helpfully keep us grounded:

We have sinned... in the things we have done, and the things we have not done;
in the love we have withheld, and in the indifference we have justified.

Then, the liberating, hope-filled, words of absolution,
"Almighty God... pardon you and set you free... strengthen you in all goodness...
and keep you in eternal life... through Jesus Christ our Lord."

As we reflect on the way we currently live our lives, may God's Spirit help us to be honest and, if necessary, give us the wisdom and courage to reset things. Let go of the things that need to be let go of and begin again those things we know to be right.

May God bless and guide you, and me, in the big and small choices we'll make this week... in the name of Christ. Amen