

July 14, 2024

PENTECOST 8

St. Andrew's

2 Sam 6:1-5, 12b-19; Ps 24; Eph 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

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One of the privileges of my ministry as Bishop of Kootenay was that I spent each Sunday with a different congregation and saw first-hand the many faithful people gathered across our diocese. I have many wonderful memories of those years. One of those memories comes from St. Saviour's in Penticton where I often met a woman with Down's Syndrome. She loved to dance and from time to time she was invited to perform a liturgical dance at the front of the church. On those occasions she would wear long flowing clothes and her movements expressed her deep joy as she worshipped through her dance. On other occasions when she was moved by the moment she would spontaneously step into the aisle and dance. She was loved by the congregation and her dancing was a gift to all of us who were fortunate to see her.

I remember an interview with the Canadian Theologian Gregory Baum who was asked about the difference between Protestant and Catholic worship. Noting the often lack of colour, and icons in some Protestant traditions and the stained glass, banners, and colours in a more Catholic tradition he said wryly, "Worshipping in a protestant church is a bit like making love by telephone!" What he meant was that human beings need to use all our senses when it comes to worship and not just our intellects. That young woman in Penticton would have understood that intuitively.

Still not everyone would agree. In our first reading from 2 Samuel we have heard how David danced before the Lord as the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem. Saul's daughter, Michal, looked askance at David. But David was overjoyed that the Ark was finding a home in Jerusalem. For the Ark was a sign of the presence of God and where the Ark dwelt, the people were assured of God's care. For David, it was a sign of God's favour and protection. Having returned from battle, he was overcome with joy and so he led the procession with a dance. It was a sign of his trust in God, and his gratitude for God's presence. And when the ark arrived in its place he made offerings and blessed the people.

Now contrast this story with the reading from the gospel. From a tale of joy, we are faced with a tale of tragedy. For in our gospel today, we hear of the beheading of John the Baptist - John who has been the one to call people to repentance and to prepare for the one who was to come after him. It is John who baptized Jesus at the beginning of his ministry and in his prophetic role he has criticized the excesses and immorality of King Herod who had married his brother's wife, Herodias. As a result, Herod has thrown John into prison and yet he was still wary of him. So our story moves forward to Herod's birthday when he gives a great banquet for all the leaders of Galilee. And during the banquet his wife's daughter Salome, came into the hall and danced for the king. Herod was entranced. He promised to give a great gift to the young woman. Consulting her mother who had been challenged by John the Baptist and wanted him dead, Salome came back and said, "Bring me the head of John the Baptist!" Caught by his promise, or to put it more accurately, caught by his compromise, Herod had John beheaded, and presented John's head to Salome on a platter, who in turn gave it to her mother. It is a tragic tale and a tragic end to the life of the prophet whose whole life pointed toward Jesus.

We can think about this story in several ways. It is about hubris and the use and abuse of power for personal gain. It also places Jesus' ministry in continuity with John's ministry. Just before this passage we read of the mission of the disciples whom Jesus has sent out to call people to repentance, to cast out demons and to heal the sick. And then we hear of John's beheading. It is a reminder that the Gospel is a challenge to the kingdoms of this world and that the consequences can be harsh. I am reminded of the Rabbi, who when asked by a journalist what his job was, after a moment said, "To comfort the disturbed, and to disturb the comfortable." And then today's passage is immediately followed by the return of the disciples as they report back to Jesus and go with him to a deserted place, where the crowds seek him out. Mark tells us 5,000 are fed. Despite the threat of Herod, the crowds continue to gather to hear Jesus. Placed as it is between the sending of the disciples and the feeding of the Five Thousand, I am sure that Mark meant us to see that Jesus' mission will continue in the face of all challenges. As one writer has said, "It will take more than decapitation to stop the truth of God; more than crucifixion to stop the Son of God; more than persecution to stop the mission of God." ("A Terrible Text", Christian Century, June 28, 2003, page 19)

In the midst of the gospel story today is a young woman dancing - dancing for her king and for his courtiers. She does his bidding and is rewarded. But caught up in the spirit of this earthly king, she listens to her vindictive mother and requests the death of the prophet of God.

I am intrigued that this morning in our scriptures we see two figures dancing - David who dances before the Lord, the King of Creation, and Salome who dances before King Herod, the earthly ruler of the region of Galilee. One is a dance of joyful faith and the other is a dance of complicity with the ruling powers. It is worth thinking about these two dancers. For what moves them is very different.

In terms of today's readings we might ask ourselves - so what is it that moves us? What is the music to which we dance? What is the music that determines our steps? Will we dance with David or with Salome? Will our steps take us along the way of faith, or along another path? We are familiar with the words of Henry David Thoreau who wrote: "If a person (man[sic]) does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." I am sure that Jesus knows the challenges we, and all disciples, will face in the course of our lives and so he taught us to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done." And so it is that every time we gather for worship - to offer our praise and to receive the Word of God in Scripture and the Living Word of Life in bread and wine, we continue to encourage one another with the words "Go and keep choosing God's kingdom". AMEN.