

Homily for People and Parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 7th July 2024, Pentecost 7

Readings: 2Samuel 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 supposing they were stranded on a desert island they had to choose eight pieces of music, a book, and a luxury item. So that guests didn't choose the same book it was assumed that they already had a copy of the Bible and the complete works of William Shakespeare, but it was never explained how these came to be with them!

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 and exactly how many is argued fiercely by people who know these things. The conservative estimate is at least four hundred and twenty words 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 still roll around in my head all these years later. Imagine my delight when my son, in his last year of school, was tasked to read the tragedy of Macbeth together with a book based on the play by David Hewson, and Andrew Hartley. I downloaded the book on Audible and listened to it in the car and it was fascinating to hear how the plot had been adapted.

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 are 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.

I will resist the temptation to draw parallels with the unfolding Presidential election developing in the United States and will instead head straight to the Gospel! However, the Gospel reading is as gruesome as Macbeth 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 an 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 do not acknowledge complexity.

Surely there is a self-interested and amoral element within each of us, as well as one that is generous and moral? It is a challenge to consistently make wise and generous choices, and for this to happen often enough that this way of being in the world becomes who we are.

The Gospel writer tells us that for Herod there was a party, and presumably enough alcohol consumed to diminish inhibition and increase the risk of impulsive and reckless behaviour. 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 most of us make choices which compromise what we believe to be right. Small indulgences can even become unhealthy addictions, and small acts of unkindness can become consistent 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?

However, we are not abandoned in this task of living moral, compassionate, and generous lives. Our intellect and conscience enables helpful reflection, and God's Spirit can give guidance, insight, and courage when we pray. In our congregational worship we helpfully have opportunity to recognise that we fall short and have need for forgiveness, and that we are all works of progress.

If only Macbeth and Herod had had the opportunity to reflect on their lives with a wise third party, and had thoughtfully prayed these words of confession we often offer in our worship:

*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 honesty in this that can helpfully keep us grounded:
For we have each 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.

But then there are these 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.”

Pardoned! Set free! and Strengthened!

Can we each reflect this week on the way we currently live our lives, praying that God’s Spirit help us be honest? That God’s Spirit give us each the wisdom to recognise the things that need to be changed or left behind, and the courage to do these things.

May God bless and guide you, and me, in this work that we be better able to live lives that make a difference for good. In the name of Christ. Amen