



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 7
Proper 10 (B)
July 11, 2021

RCL: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

We often hear this passage cited as support for liturgical dance. These 13 verses, however, can be interpreted as a challenge to reflect on the possibilities as well as the serious dangers of linking religious symbolism with political power. Scripture scholar Bruce C. Birch's comments on this passage highlight the ambiguities of the king's creation of a new capital city centered on an object that symbolizes God's presence - "David's intense personal involvement is either a genuine recognition and honoring of true power in the Lord (represented by the ark) or a manipulation of religious symbols for the sake of his own enhanced power."

The merging of religion and politics remains a spiritually charged, ambiguous matter today. Religious symbols and prayers at inaugural ceremonies, for example, remind us of the accountability leaders have to God, as well as the grave responsibilities entrusted to those who serve. Recent events in American politics are as "exhibit A" of the shadow side of such symbolism – political figures being interpreted in Messianic terms, political contests being cast as a struggle between God's people and Satan, and prominent religious leaders unabashedly endorsing politicians. Our experiences show us how religion has the power to constellate deep, unconscious, primordial energies, and politics can trigger our base tendency toward tribalism. While religious symbolism can have an appropriate place in our politics, our reading from 2 Samuel stands as a warning to those who cavalierly link the two!

- How can we responsibly use religious symbolism in our politics and exercise of secular authority? Is it at all possible?

Psalm 24

Psalm 24 might have been a "song of ascent", i.e., a hymn pilgrims sang as they approached the holy city of Jerusalem. As they climbed the hill to the Temple, we can imagine them singing in call and response – "Who can ascend the hill of the LORD?" "Those who have clean hands and a pure heart!" (vv 3-4). This beautiful poem invites one to ask - as children of Israel's God, how ought we to live personally and collectively?

Our psalm echoes the Decalogue and foreshadows the Sermon on the Mount. All three sacred texts are instructions on how one is called to live in light of the reality that “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it” (v. 1). All choices, all actions, all activities take place under this foundational principle – we live and have our being within God’s reign.

The Psalmist references seas and rivers (v.2) – ancient symbols of chaos over which the God of Israel brings order and then creation (cf. Genesis 1). Verses 7-10 underscore the power and strength of this Warrior King who achieves a decisive victory over these anarchic energies. Those who pray with this psalm are invited to become co-creators with God, participating in the ongoing work of bringing order to the forces of moral chaos and injustice which continually threaten human dignity.

- How are you being called to co-create with God a more just, moral, dignified world?

Ephesians 1:3-14

The scripture scholar Pheme Perkins writes, “Ephesians indicates that the purpose of our election is to praise God’s glory. We cannot engage in that praise without the ability to perceive God’s redeeming power at work.” The opening verses of the letter are a call to recognize how our lives have been transformed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, how we are transformed in the way we see the universe, the way we understand ourselves, the way we live our lives. Whereas the gospels tell us about the earthly ministry of Jesus, Ephesians speaks of what Jesus is doing now. In the understanding of our author here (traditionally Paul, but in reality pseudonymous), Jesus has brought us spiritual blessing, forgiveness of sin, and adoption as God’s people.

We notice that redemption (Greek *apolytrosis*, meaning “release effected by a payment of ransom”) is mentioned twice in our text. The author might be building on a metaphor used by Paul in earlier letters – enslavement to Sin (with a capital S). Paul understood Sin to be a cosmic power that has enslaved all. It’s a power that forces us to be self-centered; to live by the false values of the world. The only way to escape this power was to die and go to a different mode of existence. Jesus escapes the power of Sin through his death, a journey we participate in through baptism. What’s more, in the resurrection, Jesus is raised in power, a power that is shared with us. This energy creates a new life for us, a life in community where we work to counter the power of Sin and mitigate its effects in the world. This is redemption. It’s a new way to live, the way God dreamed and planned it to be, God’s will “for the fullness of time.”

Our verses from Ephesians invite us to claim our “inheritance,” to claim this power to live a transformed life. This is an invitation to do something great; to partner with God in the work of transformation, to bring this experience of “redemption” to all – because it is their birthright.

- How can we claim our “redemption” (as this text understands it) and share it with others?

Mark 6:14-29

A number of stories from the Hebrew scriptures foreshadow the tale of Herod and John – for example, Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah, Jephthah’s daughter, Esther, who convinces a king to pledge half his kingdom, and Judith, who seduces Holofernes, only to cut off his head! Mark, in composing this story, was using an

ancient form of biblical interpretation called typology, wherein stories about God’s saving work throughout history are shown to correspond.

Our gospel story bears a warning to those who have the privilege of exercising authority – beware the temptation to “save face”. Herod Antipas, an otherwise able administrator, talks himself into a situation where he finds it necessary, in order to maintain his persona, ego, and grip on power, to sacrifice an innocent. This must be an archetypal dynamic, as we see it repeated and replayed throughout history, including in our own era. We also note that sex has tentacles running through this episode, as well. Herod violated the Mosaic Law by marrying his brother’s wife, then her daughter beguiles the leading men of Galilee with a dance. Sex and power, along with money, exercise an influence over the human psyche that is bewitching! Of course, the Herods of the world ought to be condemned for their sacrificing of truth and justice to save their own skin, but then again, isn’t there a bit of this Herod in each of us?

- How does this reading invite you to face your own Herod-like shadow, that part of yourself that will do almost anything to save face, to avoid humiliation, to win?

***Brian B. Pinter** is a teacher of religious studies at Fordham Preparatory School in the Bronx and a Pastoral Associate at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola in Manhattan.*