

Readings for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

11th July 2021

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

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Gospel: St Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of the healings and other miracles, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said,

“It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

A Reflection for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

This is turning out to be something of a summer of sport - some of it is postponed from last year, of course. Athletes of all disciplines seem to have returned to the pitches, stadia and courts with a renewed determination to give their all – and that gives us plenty to cheer about, even if our own team or favourite doesn’t do as well as we had hoped. There is the football of course – impossible to miss in the past week, even if you are not a fan. In less than two weeks’ time, the Olympic Games will start, followed in August by the Paralympics. There is the Tour de France, Formula 1, Cricket, and so much more. This week, I have enjoyed watching some of the tennis – probably the sporting highlight of the year for me. And this year it has included an extraordinary run of success for an 18-year-old British girl playing her first Wimbledon – fairy-tale stuff.

But, for the athletes, the reality is not often a fairy tale. Their success or disappointment is the culmination of years of training and hard work, and the performances we enjoy require total focus on the task in hand. Yes, there are setbacks, and they can be learned from, but at the time they must be set aside to focus on the next point. Athletes sometimes speak of being ‘in the zone’ as they focus so intently on what they are doing.

Focus on the task, if not to the same intensity, is something that is important in many walks of life if we want to do things well and to the best of our ability. In our Old Testament and Gospel readings today, we see two of Israel’s leaders, approximately thousand years apart, with very different approaches to life and to fulfilling the task allotted to them.

David, Israel’s newly anointed king, sets about bringing the Ark of God, or the Ark of the Covenant as it is described elsewhere, to his new capital in Jerusalem. This was the Ark built by the Israelites in the wilderness to contain the two stone tablets of the law given at Sinai. It symbolised God’s presence with them, but it had been captured by

Philistines in the reign of Saul. There is no record of Saul trying to retrieve it, but its presence had brought misfortune on their cities, so the Philistines had returned it and it had remained at the house of Abinadab for 20 years. Now David was bringing it back to the centre of the nation's life.

It was quite a party, and all Israel were invited. There was great rejoicing, music and dancing, sacrifices and offerings. David himself was completely uninhibited in his worship, leaping and dancing before the Lord. He might well have been described as being 'in the zone' in his praise of God. David got things very wrong at times, and had his setbacks, but on this occasion we see God's chosen king putting God at the centre again.

Fast forward a thousand years and we find Herod Antipas as Tetrarch of the Roman province of Judea, not really a king but a leader with limited powers under Roman authority. Herod was a weak and fearful leader. We see it immediately in today's Gospel reading. Herod had heard about Jesus, perhaps about some of the miracles that he or his disciples had brought about. There were rumours circulating that suggested John the Baptist had risen from the dead and they reminded Herod of his guilty conscience. So we have this flashback to when he had John executed.

Herod hadn't understood John the Baptist and was both frightened and intrigued by him. Like many weak rulers he felt threatened by John who was popular and who spoke the truth boldly – someone who might challenge his power base. But he also knew him to be righteous and holy, so he had protected him. However, then John criticised Herod's domestic arrangements. Although the details vary somewhat in different Biblical accounts and translations, and in the account of the contemporary historian Josephus, it is clear that the marital relationships of the Herod family were, at the very least, complex and incestuous. Public criticism by John was a step too far, too much of a challenge, so the easiest thing was to put him away and John was imprisoned – something we continue to see across the world when weak rulers are criticised.

The scene in today's reading is another party, one to celebrate Herod's birthday. Unlike David's celebrations, this was a party for the elite only – his courtiers, officers and the leaders of Galilee. This time, the dancing was not to worship God but was the unusual spectacle of a royal princess giving a public display. According to Josephus, she was named Salome, but other legends such as her dance of the seven veils owe more to 19th Century literature than what we know of the reality of the time. What we do know is that in the background is Herodias, Salome's mother and now Herod's wife, nursing a grudge against John the Baptist. She was quick to take advantage of the opportunity that arose when Herod made his rash promise to give her daughter whatever she wanted. A foolish and arrogant thing to do, Herod was perhaps boastfully trying to impress his guests. So it was that the grotesque demand for John's head was made. We are told that Herod was deeply grieved by this request, but don't waste too much sympathy on him as it wasn't sufficient to make him do the right thing. He preferred to save his own face rather than John's life.

So, we have the accounts of two contrasting kings. On the one hand is David who did the right thing in putting God at the centre of his nation. But, as is so often the case, not everyone understood that. His wife, Michal, disapproved of David; she thought he was behaving in an unseemly and undignified manner for a king, and she despised him. On the other hand is Herod, not following God's will by listening to John the Baptist, or indeed to the Messiah who was close at hand, but acting out of fear and self-interest. He and his family demonstrate how power, prestige and wealth

can corrupt. And there is nothing to tell us that his actions were criticised by any of his guests – as people continue to find out to this day, speaking truth to power can be difficult and dangerous. Perhaps they were fearful too.

The stories of these two characters give us food for thought as we consider how we live out our Christian lives and fulfil the tasks allotted to us. There will be times when we know we have done the right thing in the circumstances, even though this was not particularly easy. Equally, we can probably all identify times when we have tried to save face, sought our own interests above those of others, or have tried to keep others sweet by giving them what they want when that really wasn't a good idea.

As Christians, the reading from Ephesians gives the context of our lives. It is an outpouring of praise, of all that God has done for us, all he desires for us. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing; his glorious grace has been freely bestowed on us; the riches of his grace have been lavished upon us. It is typical of a prayer of blessing of the time. It also sets our Christian lives within God's plan for the world. It reminds us of our dependence on God. It reminds us that God created us to be in relationship with Him, and to be part of His life and love in the world.

Paul has here a similar recognition of the centrality of God in our lives as David did, something that Herod completely missed. Paul knew that praise is the appropriate way to respond to God, the attitude in which to live our lives and maybe that is what it means to be 'in the zone' as Christians. We may not be elite athletes or leaders of nations, but we all have our own unique God-given role to fulfil in this world and we are called to pursue that with as much focus, commitment and praise as we can muster.