

ADDRESS

15 July 2018

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 6.1 -5, 12b – 19	David brings the ark to Jerusalem
Psalms 24	Entry to the temple
Ephesians 1.1-14	Spiritual blessings in Christ
Mark 6.14-29	Death of John the Baptist

Lord, may your Word always be a light unto our feet and a lamp unto our path.

25 years ago John Cleese, of Monty Python and Fawlty Towers fame, wrote a more than half-serious book, called *Families and how to survive them*. He wrote the book with the therapist who had been working with him for more than 10 years, and it's in the form of a dialogue, with illustrations which coat the wisdom of the text with some wacky humour. The basic message is that, and I quote, *most of our attitudes and characteristics are grounded in our original family experience and relationships*. So, if you don't like yourself sometimes, blame Mum or Dad . . . or sister or brother, or nasty old Uncle Jim.

Most of us belong to a number of families at different times in our life – our birth family, our school family, our work family, our service club family, our church family -- the church I grew up in in Chatswood is now closed, but it's heritage-listed, so it can't be tampered with or demolished. It sits abandoned and empty, and I feel a gulp in my throat whenever I drive past because I spent so many happy years there, and because that's where I came to know God. Many people feel the same about St Mark's.

All three of our readings today deal with family life, of one kind or another. First we read that, after the death of King Saul, David had a special cart built and brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem amidst wild celebration – the men danced with all their might, to the sound of lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. The ark which Saul had neglected, at his peril, had been returned to the people; it was set in the high place where the temple was to be built, and there was a feast for all the people, a feast of bread and meat and raisin cake.

But David's wife, Michal, Saul's younger daughter, was not impressed. She had been in love with David when he was young and athletic, and she had persuaded her father to let her marry him. Her love faded when David was anointed as the next king. The two of them were driven out of the city, and forced to live as fugitives, hiding out in caves in the wilderness. She went to live with another man, but David reclaimed her during the negotiations for him to become king.

Now she sees her royal husband leaping around like any common fellow, and the verses which follow our reading show another reason why she despised him – when David danced, the ephod he was wearing flared up and he exposed himself. Michal is scathing, verse 20, *How the king of Israel honoured himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servant's maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself.* So David did not sleep with her from that day on, so she could not have children to inherit the throne. After David's death, Bathsheba's son Solomon became the new king. Families need mutual respect to hold together.

It's a very human story, and the passages in our lectionary only give snippets of it – but enough to get the message across– that living in obedience to the will of God can sometimes bring us into conflict with members of our human family. David had a troubled life, but his obituary is one we would all like to deserve –we find it in the first book of Kings: *David did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.* (1 Kings 15.5) He committed one great sequence of sins, but was forgiven because of his lifelong obedience, and the Messiah was one of his descendants.

Our Gospel reading is a more grisly story of family disharmony – we know from the historian Josephus, as well as from the Bible, that the Herodian family was quite dysfunctional, possibly from generations of inbreeding. Herodias was the daughter of King Aristobolus IV, one of the sons of Herod the Great, who had married his cousin Berenice. Herod the Great married Herodias off to his son Herod II, her half-uncle, whom the gospel calls Philip, in the family's continual pursuit of territory and power.

Later Herodias divorced her husband and married his half-brother, King Herod Antipas, who divorced his first wife, Phasaelis, to marry her. This marriage was contrary to Jewish law, as laid down in the book of Leviticus: *If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless.* (Lev.20.21). The marriage also led to a disastrous war with Phasaelis's father, the king of Nabatea. The Roman emperor Tiberias intervened -- Antipas was defeated and he and Herodias and Salome, her daughter, were driven into exile in Gaul, and nothing was heard of them after that.

We no longer think it illegal or sinful to marry a brother's widow. The Book of Common Prayer does not prohibit it; King Henry VIII did it, George V married his brother's fiancée after his brother died – there is no point in letting an eligible princess go to waste, when she can help secure a royal dynasty. The sin of Antipas and Herodias was in the double divorce -- not for love, but to secure greater royal power. John the Baptist condemned the marriage and paid the price. So,

when Herod heard of Jesus' preaching, Luke tells us, he wanted to meet him, to see if Jesus really was his accuser come back to life, as some people were saying.

John's disciples buried his body, but Herodias kept his head, and no-one knows what happened to it afterwards. Muslims claim his head is inside the jewelled casket I was shown in a shrine in the great mosque in Damascus; some Christians claim it is in a church in Rome; others insist it is in Amiens, in France; others say it is in Istanbul; and many historians believe it was lost during the Crusades. There are many legends, because of the power of this story.

In Mark's gospel, the story is inserted into the account of Jesus' beginning to create a new family – the family of his followers. Chapter six begins with Jesus' being rejected by the people of his home town, then tells of his sending out the 12 apostles two by two to proclaim his message. After the account of John's death, we return to the story -- the disciples come back to Jesus to tell him what they had done and taught. Mark is contrasting the dysfunction and the power plays of the royal family with the harmony and the achievements of the new Christian community.

Today's epistle reading is the beginning of what appears to be a circular letter to the early Christian congregations, almost 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. This makes it different from Paul's other pastoral letters, which deal with particular issues in particular churches. Paul is in prison, in chains, awaiting trial; so he sends a letter to all the churches, dealing with issues which are important for many of them, and marvelling at the grace of God which has created a new family in which all are equally blessed

Notice the analogy Paul uses: believers are adopted into God's family through Jesus Christ (verse 5); this is his gift (verse 8); as his adopted children we share in his inheritance, of eternal life in glory (verse 11); as he wrote in an earlier letter, to the Galatians – *in the church there is no longer Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*. All who share in God's inheritance are equally marked by the gift of the Holy Spirit (verse 13).

We'll hear more from this unique epistle over the next six weeks, so you might like to read ahead -- the lectionary leaves out the passages which have become contentious in a very different world: verses like *wives, be subject to your husbands* and *children, obey your parents* and *slaves obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling*. Arguments over passages like these distract from Paul's core message that, as members of God's family, our primary obedience needs to be to our heavenly Father. This heavenly father is ready to answer the prayers of all his people, the story of the cave rescue in Thailand shows that the age of miracles is not over, but he is especially close to those who call upon him in the name of his Son, Jesus.

Today's passage shows that Christians were coming to an understanding of God as Three-in-One centuries before the Trinity was defined in the creeds of the church. So, looking at the passage again -- we begin with two verses of greeting. These are followed by four verses of praise to the Father, who has chosen us in love to become members of his new family, through Jesus his Son. Paul sees predestination as a given, in line with Jewish rabbinic tradition, but is quite clear that we can choose whether or not to claim our inheritance.

The next six verses are about this inheritance in Christ – about how God fulfilled his eternal plan of redemption through Jesus' obedience. It is a mystery – we can't explain it in neat theological formulae, like the ransom theory or the penal substitution theory or the recapitulation theory and at least six other theories: we need simply to experience our calling and rejoice in our inheritance.

These verses would have had special significance for the members of the early churches, because they stressed that Jew and Gentile shared a common experience of redemption. They were all destined for adoption into God's family. Jews were continually reminded, *Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you* (Deut.15.15). Gentiles had had a parallel experience, they had been slaves to ignorance, to ignorance of God's love and redemption, like so many people today, until they heard the good news from the first apostles and teachers.

We have the same inheritance, as members of God's family, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift of more value than anything we might inherit in our human family – a gift which is both a pledge and a preview of our eternal life.

The latest figures show that State governments in Australia hold more than \$90 million dollars in unclaimed inheritances – people move away, they lose touch with their family, they just do not know that they are heirs. Likewise, millions of people have never been in touch with their family in God, they have never realised their priceless inheritance in Christ, or they have moved away from the faith. We must never become like them, and we must take every opportunity which God provides to tell others what they are missing. Today's passage reminds us that Paul knew that he was called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. So are we.

Father God, we give thanks for our inheritance through our Lord Jesus Christ. Grant that we may cling to it as our most precious possession, and be ready to welcome others into your heavenly family. We ask through that same Lord, your Son, our Saviour and our brother. AMEN.