

The Disease

There is a particular disease common to very intelligent people that runs through today's readings. It is a disease that often plagues gifted people, people who are capable of making excellent decisions in those areas in which they are gifted. People who's gifts might lead you to believe that they have been "chosen" to lead. And since all of us are gifted and chosen in some way, what the readings reveal is relevant for all of us.

The disease (or sin) I am talking about is a lack of humility or pride. What the Bible identifies as self-idolatry. In other words, gifted people easily develop such an overblown sense of their own importance, that preserving status and power overtakes their commitment to the well-being of the people around them.

Obviously, gifted people have a way of finding their way to the top. They know how to influence the people around them in order to achieve their goals. And very often they are able to accomplish great things on behalf of the people they serve. The world needs gifted people in positions of leadership.

But it seems that the confidence that such people have in their own gifts can also be their Achilles heel. As their confidence in their own judgment grows, so does their sense of self worth, until it becomes unshakeable. And because of this, their ability to submit to the judgment of others and their commitment to the worth of others shrinks. As they grow larger in their own minds, others become smaller.

David, Like the Rising Sun

One of the things that is striking about this morning's Old Testament reading is how exultant King David is over how well things are going for him as the successor to King Saul. David is absorbed in a dance of celebration, that seems over the top to one of his observers. He is literally self-intoxicated; gleefully basking in his own success every bit as much as he is celebrating the success he has brought to his kingdom.

What a wonderful feeling to be a conqueror on top of the world, to be the one who can outsmart everyone else, the one who delivers, and the one everyone turns to when danger threatens. In his mind the trajectory of his life is like that of a sun forever rising, ever more bright and full of glory. And from his viewpoint at the top, he is the center of his world.

Then right away, the story cuts away to David's wife Michal, daughter of Saul who is quietly watching him from her window and she is filled with loathing. Suddenly the dark side of David's giftedness is exposed.

Michal knows how he has used her as his political pawn and she knows the cruel reality of his womanizing tendencies and the loneliness it has brought her.

Michal sees the fine line David is crossing as he dances. It is the line between celebrating what he has done for his people as their Shepherd King, and his celebration of himself as the key figure in that success.

And she is rightly put off by what she sees.

Contemporary Examples

The fact that this story and the Gospel are our assigned readings at this moment in our nation's history seems almost too significant ignore.

They strike me as a clear warning, because we are faced with two men who have been immensely successful in their climb to the top, but who's belief in their own giftedness and superior judgement blinds them to what most of us can plainly see; that neither is fit to lead us into the future.

When I was a Minister on the island of Kauai, in Hawaii, there was a minister in one of our churches who decided that he was going to take

his congregation out of the denomination and lead it in a direction that more suited his beliefs. Many in his congregation were against his plan and so, after some negotiating, the Church and Ministry Committee for our Association decided to hold a Fitness Review.

It was a painful and contentious evening, with restricted access and picketers yelling at us from outside. But the facts were pretty clear and not long after, the Minister's position at the church was terminated.

What a pitiful thing it was to see this "man of the cloth" holding so self-righteously to his position, that he was willing to see an entire congregation destroyed in order to get his way. It was my first up front and personal look at how destructive a wrecking ball a person can be, when his belief in his own understanding and in his own chosenness is so great, that he cannot consider anything that brings his authority into question.

King David and King Herod

The Gospel reading for this morning also deals with this sin of becoming so important in one's own eyes, that others seem to matter less and ultimately become expendable. And when we hold it up next to the Old Testament Reading, we get a comparison between two very different Kings. On the one hand we have David, the greatest and most beloved

King of Israel and on the other, King Herod, among the worst and most hated.

But we also find important similarities hidden from the larger public in the shadows; a more devious and conniving side, that is ruthlessly committed to preserving the myth of their own greatness and struggling unsuccessfully with the temptation to sacrifice others on the altar of their own needs and desires.

King Herod promises his daughter anything she wants as an overblown way of celebrating his own greatness and generosity in front of his friends. But when she asks for the head of John the Baptist, he is suddenly faced with the question of whether he is willing to execute a man he knows is innocent and who he doesn't really want to put to death. And his fear of looking weak and indecisive wins out and he gives her what she wants.

The great irony is that, Herod the "King" in name, turns out in reality to be Herod the "slave". He is slave to his fear of being exposed; a man willing to sacrifice others, even against his own will, in subservience to his fear.

King David, on the other hand, is a far more confident figure. But no less treacherous in his willingness to sacrifice others on the altar of his own need. The most well-known example is when he arranges for his faithful servant Uriah to be killed in battle, so that he can take the man's wife, Bathsheba, for himself.

So, while Herod sacrifices others to his fears, David sacrifices others to his lust and sense of entitlement. Both act out of a sense of self-importance that makes their own needs overshadow the needs and the well-being of others. Both bear the title "King," but in their worst moments, both are shown to be slaves to the myth of their own greatness.

Lessons for Us

A great theologian once said that Christianity is a religion that teaches us how to die well. That makes sense in an obvious way, because every day we live, we move closer to the day we will die. No-one can escape this reality. We know that as surely as the sun moves from dawn to dusk, that our lives move from a beginning to an end. Our power and reach grows to a peak and then descends.

More importantly the theologian was referring to an inner attitude of faith which we learn from Jesus, through the way he loved the world and died for us on the cross.

The example Jesus set when he went to the cross was not so much about growing more bright and powerful and glorious like the rising sun, nor was it about struggling to hold onto that power at all costs.

The message of Jesus life has more to do with learning to face that inevitable decline with grace; in a way that gives others life and paradoxically leads to a greater heavenly life, even as this earthly life dims and gives way to a sunset. As John the Baptist put it elsewhere, “I must decrease, so that he (Christ) may increase!. This decrease was the source of his joy; a joy which puzzled King Herod, who couldn’t understand why his prisoner in the dungeon was joyful and free, while he, the King who held the key, was wracked with fear and anxiety.

Christianity teaches us that the diminishing of our own power doesn’t have to be a meaningless tragedy. That some of the most powerful and meaningful contributions we can make, and some of the richest moments in our lives may happen as a result of how and when and why we choose to let go.

Do we struggle to deny this inevitability and pretend to stay at our Zenith in the sky, denying the inevitable coming of dusk? Or do we use each letting go as an opportunity for God to replace our losses with his grace and grow larger in us, evaporating the pride that once hamstrung us, freeing us from our fears and delusions and opening our windows ever wider to the cross breezes of His compassion and grace.