

Sermon Archive 208

Sunday 15 July, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 6: 14-29

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Political success and ethical failure. Strengths that help, and weaknesses that hinder. Strategic advantages and personal vulnerabilities. Worldly weapons and heavenly push-back.

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He's in charge. You can't argue that he's not. Here are some reasons and some implications.

He's in charge because the great machine of State says so. The machine is more than the person in the role just now. It's the whole history of Empire, the legends of Romulus and Remus being raised by wolves. It's the mystique of history's heroes. It's the large scale buildings that are really loud-shouted monuments to power. The machine involves dignity of the office, famous events in history - the great national narrative of pride. It's the story (or is that propaganda) of why we are better than the ordinary others. It is senators and Senate. It is law and it is discipline. It is confidence, it is gravitas. And just now, for this season (we know not how long), all of that stands behind and beneath this anointed man, making him look bigger than he is, demanding that he be taken seriously. The machine is behind him, and that is one of his strengths.

Another of his strengths is that, by virtue of the machine being behind him, powerful others want to be around him. Those who seek power by association, who seek influence, who seek advantage, maybe even those who seek glory (fame, camera flash, twitter followers) gather around. And some of them bring assets of their own. Some of them bring influence in their own smaller realms. Some have the ear of their people. Some have money. Some have weapons and mercenaries to use them. So he can pick up the phone and call in a favours. The network, the web, the dark web, the backs that can be scratched. It's hard to get things done if you're working alone. But for this small man, during this season of time, this social, political, business, back room and front room web is certainly one of his strengths.

Another of his strengths shouldn't be a strength at all. It is only a strength because the society around him is impressed by shallow things. He's got the capacity to put on a party. He's got dancing girls - well, a dancing girl. So I guess there are musicians there. And some of the dialogue reported (with rash promises and "look at me" speech, suggests that with the dancing girls and musicians, there are also bar tenders. Some might quietly break bread in a borrowed room. Some might give fish and bread to the hungry masses. But this is a **party**. Interestingly it is a party in honour of . . . O yes, that's right; it's in honour of the host. The shiny, probably drunken bauble is all about **him**. The dialogue is all about how powerful he is, how he owns a kingdom. His capacity to throw a self-promoting occasion for favoured people is one of his strengths.

A further strength for this man, in this limited season, is his capacity to make people frightened. He's got prisons available. He's got death penalties at hand. If people get critical, a bit loud in their opposition, maybe firstly he just reminds them of these powers - that he has them. I guess sometimes just reminding people is enough to pull them into line. (Pull back the veil a little, that the gun may be seen.) But if reminding doesn't frighten them into cooperation, then he can always **use** the powers. Popping someone in prison removes their voice from the public discourse. And there's always the chopping off of someone's head - the most final quick and efficient method for closing a criticism. Because it's so quick and efficient, you'd think it would be the "go to" method - wouldn't you? Why would you ever go to the trouble of crucifying someone? That's a long, drawn-out, labour intensive method - lots of soldiers required. Why would you do it? You do it because it's public and grotesque. It gets noticed and spreads the fear. And when your empire is built on fear, relies on fear, works with fear, the more frightening, the more public, the less quick and silent, the better. And this man is good at working with fear. And that, in this season, is a definite asset.

Enough about the strengths! Let's look at some of his vulnerabilities. These are the things that will contribute to his doing something that in later years will haunt him.

The first vulnerability is his acquiescing closeness to a lover whose anger and resentment is unappeasable. She won't be happy until there is death for the man who has criticised her. The prophet has called her out, and she's become angry. The anger calls for blood, and won't give up until blood flows. The small man has tried a compromise - throwing the prophet in prison. Surely that will satisfy her. It doesn't. Half-measures, compromises, workable solutions are not enough. His first vulnerability is that he's concerned about pleasing whom cannot be pleased.

His wife (quote / unquote) is of course of strategic value to him. In those days marriages among rulers were about building and cementing political alliances. And this second wife of his (stolen from another power-marriage) secured relationship with neighbouring regions. It also made the couple look more properly Jewish than the small “not-really Jewish” man actually was. Having this wife at his side was useful, so I guess he’s going to want to keep her happy. As I say, that, for this man, during this season, constitutes a vulnerability.

A second vulnerability, within his capacity to throw a party with dancing girls, is that he’s somewhat overly pleased by the dancing. Despite all the film versions of a somewhat salacious “Salome’s dance of the seven veils”, in Mark’s gospel the dancer is described as a “korasio” (κορασία) - a young girl. She is also either his step-daughter or daughter. In an environment in which the dialogue suggests intoxication, he is “pleased by her dancing”. Am I alone in finding that a little creepy? Whether I am alone or not, his pleasure leads him to make a foolish promise. “I will give you whatever you want!” Now he’s irretrievably compromised. Now he’s no longer in charge. How many times since then have people of power done foolish things out of lust? How many times have matters of pleasure led powerful people into compromises which eventually have led to their downfall? For this man, during this season, this constitutes a vulnerability.

The next vulnerability is his concern for what people in this moment, at this time, think about him. I’ve decided not to describe it as a “concern for reputation” - because any sober reflection in the morning, beyond the time of drunken, bad decision, would not find his reputation enhanced by his decision to kill the prophet. Indeed the sober reflection of thousands of years gives him no high reputation. He gets infamy, rather than fame. But at the time, in the heat of the party, all he wants is for his friends and network to see him keeping a promise he made - a rash, foolish promise, the cost of which was to be met by an innocent other. His immediate desire to impress his friends, by keeping the promise that he should never have made, is more important to him than the life of another human being. (“I made a promise, a stupid promise. I’m keeping the promise; people are suffering; tell me how great I am.”) And that, for this man, in this season, is a definite problem.

Also a problem is that he can’t immediately, or even forever actually, enure himself from the voice of the prophet. He hated it, but couldn’t help listening to it. We’re told that he used to seek the prophet out to listen to him - though

a lot of what he said was condemning him. It comes across as a sort of lurid fascination - impotent to create in him a new heart or hope or practice - but like a flame to a moth. Tell me how bad I'm being - then tell me again. I'll put you in prison, but I won't kill you - because I somehow need to hear your voice - a voice that isn't changing me, but doesn't let me go. While Paul, a few years later, longs to be rid of his thorn in the flesh, it's almost like this man is cradling his close, cultivating it. He's not able to let it go. So much so, that even after he has killed the prophet and silenced the voice, when another prophet comes along, the man of power says "no, this John risen from the dead". The man of power seems to have developed the conviction that God's agenda is unstoppable. It comes, then comes again. We kill it, we bury it; it comes again. As Jesus walks the earth, spreads his word, does his deeds, the paranoid man of power talks of the prophet "rising from the dead" - the unstoppable, unrelenting, undying work of God, and God's "chosen" rising from the dead.

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That's my summary of the strengths and vulnerabilities possessed by the man of power. You'll notice that I never used his name. Part of my reason for doing that is that I don't think his name deserves to be spoken. But also, by calling him simply the generic "man of power", I allow for this sermon to be heard as perhaps a description of other people of power. Whether and what you hear, is over to you.

Over to me, though, is to end this sermon by noting that this sad chapter, ending with a conscience-troubled man gibbering about prophets rising from the dead, is part of a wider story of God's life, love, heart- and mind-transforming activity, never ceasing - but always rising again. Chop off the head, and the voice comes back. Lay him in a tomb, and Easter comes. Maybe **that** is power.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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