

Sermon for LFLC, July 11/21:
2 Samuel 6:1-5,12b-19; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

Two of our Scripture passages today give us a glimpse of royalty: From 2 Samuel there is the joy of David's arrival in the City that will one day share his name; while Mark describes King Herod surprising himself by organizing his own birthday party.

We seldom hear *Pomp and Circumstance* these days. Britain has not held a coronation in almost 70 years. Among democracies, it is only the US that comes close to regal drama – though they wouldn't call it that – when a president is inaugurated. That the event happens in January sort of cools the environment somewhat.

Canadians, as you have observed, tend to clap with one hand as Prime Ministers are sworn in.

But for much of human history, some form of monarchy or chieftaincy was the norm – as was absolute power. We once had a 3 day stopover in Paris so we went to see Versailles. We had our 3 children with us, and they were not overly impressed. But for a couple of hours, I got to glimpse the place where the Divine Right of Kings was celebrated at extravagant and often cruel levels.

David is just beginning his rule and he does so with a brilliant flourish. Bringing the Ark of the Covenant out of mothballs, he organizes a march which is part holy pilgrimage and part parade. David is restoring the traditions of his people, claiming a capital, founding a dynasty and proclaiming the glory of Israel.

In Jerusalem aka – the City of David – the King himself becomes part Rudolf Nureyev and part Michael Jackson – down to his jockeys, he was the centre of attention. Then there was a party to which even the poor had bread AND cake.

The Throne of David became both a reality and a future Messianic hope for Israel that John the Baptist would one day proclaim as being realized in Jesus.

David – shepherd, poet, musician, warrior, conqueror, king, dancer, handsome with that red hair flowing – what's not to love? (*Oh yes, those small issues of adultery, planning an assassination and abuse of power ...*)

Herod had no such charisma. He was the son of Herod the Great – not a King in the full sense as he was one of Herod's 3 sons who got a piece of ancient Israel and Syria to rule – mainly where Jesus was in Galilee. He obviously enjoyed the royal court, but he was an insecure person and much preoccupied by this new prophet called John who was preaching about repentance and judgement. Herod was both frightened and fascinated by John. And if that wasn't enough, John was pointing to this other prophet, Jesus, saying he was Messiah, no less! Just to calm things down, best to have John arrested. And now . . . the party must go on!

As George Burns, used to say, “Meanwhile, back at the ranch . . .” there was one person who was not impressed with David and her name was Michal. She was the daughter of King Saul and Saul had promised her to David as his wife. It was not so generous as it seems, for Saul simply wanted to keep David close – perhaps even have him killed as his popularity grew. David did not treat Michal well at all.

Michal became a cast off, except that her presence was a condition of the Ark being released to David. A few verses after the text we read today, Michal criticizes David for his egoistic display – she despises him! - and then fades out of the narrative.

It is a different situation for John the Baptist. You know the story, his head became a macabre gift for his daughter – at the Queen’s suggestion. The Gospels tell us of the deep sorrow and pain John’s death brought to Jesus.

These days we often talk about collateral damage. It comes from military jargon in the Vietnam War era. Innocent people were not killed by a bomb on purpose, of course, they just happened to be too close to a bomb site, very unfortunate, but just collateral damage. There are so many ways we can use that term today:

- The First Nations children whose bodies lie unmarked on the grounds of Indian Residential schools are collateral damage to the greater task of building the Canadian nation.
- So with African-Americans who died as slaves in the Americas – collateral damage to the greater glory of spreading Commerce and Christianity (to quote David Livingstone).
- Poignant for Canadians are the 2 Michaels who are collateral damage in a dispute with China over an issue that seems too minor for such pain.
- We can name the Uighurs, the Rohingya, the Kurds, the Roma of Europe, the nameless textile workers who are treated like slaves for our cheap access to clothing and fashion. All are collateral damage to the various ‘ISMS’ to which we give our hearts and wallets.

Have you ever been a Michal? Have you ever felt used or abused then ignored by someone’s ambition or deceit? Collateral damage to someone’s ego or ambition?

Have you ever been a John, sidelined because of your passion for truth and justice, your unwillingness to compromise what you deeply believe?

I support Amnesty International, and each month receive a list of people in custody in too many nations – people who will not bow down to arbitrary power in their quest for justice and freedom.

There have been many times in history – too many times – when Christians have been the expendables. We call them saints, but that glorious title cannot mask the horrible persecution they experienced.

And Christians have long persecuted Jews and been too slow to their defense and rescue in times of persecution or worse.

Both the Wisdom and Prophetic strains of Israel, call us to beware of the seduction of power, wealth, privilege – especially religious privilege - for it will lead us to the dangerous place of treating others as means to an end.

In the letter to the Ephesians, we hear Paul tells us that in Christ we **are** special – we have the mark of the Holy Spirit as the pledge of our inheritance. But that privilege is lived in service of those the world forgets; of those whose hearts, like Michal's, are broken; for those like John whose courage led him to suffer from a fool's folly.

We have our work to do.

God's creation has become the collateral damage of our greed.

Most of the mainline churches have curtailed international missions to a token of what they once were. We have lost that sense of family and shared visions – friends who depend on us suffer. We get letters from friends in Malawi asking why the Church has stopped funding projects.

For far too long the LGBTQ+ community has been treated as unclean, unwelcome in God's house – collateral damage to those who cannot sense the Spirit's moving.

Perhaps we are collateral damage of a rapacious society that lured many from the narrow way of the Gospel to the broad road of prosperity and privilege.

As we move through this period of change in the world and in the Church, let us remember the wounded, the poor, the ignored, the little, least, last and lost that Jesus spent most of his time with.

Still, everybody likes a party – everyone likes to hear 'Pomp and Circumstance' once in a while. To forget about our troubles and just have fun! Let us not neglect all that brings true joy! After all, Jesus did not come that we should be "white knuckle" people always looking over our shoulders in fear. Jesus came that we might have joy and that joy may be complete.

But we also need to remember those who can't come to the party.

- Persecuted for their beliefs
- Shunned and shamed and excluded

You pray for the Church, I know. This week, let us pray for courage in the midst; pray for vision to see those the world has decided really don't matter. Pray for those who are shamed and shunned. These are the people Jesus for whom Jesus weeps. So should we.

But that doesn't mean there is never time for a party – sharing our joy is also part of our mission. We need to be a home for all are welcome and affirmed! Amen.