

SERMON - 12 JULY 2015: Rev Ian Walker

Readings Old Test: 2nd Samuel 11: 1 - 17

 Gospel: Mark 6: 14 - 29

PRAYER

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ has opened a new and living way into your presence. As we meditate on your word give us pure hearts and constant wills to worship you in spirit and in truth through that same Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

A while ago I got an e-mail with a whole lot of children's funny answers to questions about their knowledge of the Bible.

Of course they wouldn't be funny if the children got the answers right and often it is the spelling that makes the joke.

Maybe sometimes the children get closer to the truth than we would like to admit. One answer reads 'David was a Hebrew king who was skilled at playing the liar.'

Maybe the child who wrote that was thinking about the story of David and Bathsheba that we read this morning and maybe his spelling was not so funny after all.

It is a pretty despicable story of lies and deceit, of lust and envy, ending with the death of an honourable man.

One commentator writes: 'The story of David and Bathsheba has long aroused both dismay and astonishment: **dismay** that King David, with his manifest piety, could stoop to such an act: and **astonishment** that the Bible narrates it with such unrelenting openness.'

David, the great king and servant of God is, after all, just another man with feet of clay.

The only consolation we can draw from this story is that it makes it plain that God's cause is not dependent on humans who are all too obviously sinful but on God himself who can use even frail people, people like me and you, in his work.

The story of the death of John the Baptist is just as bad, if not worse.

Mark you, Herod was a very different character from David.

He was hated by his own people and despised by his Roman overlords. The events at his birthday party are no more than typical.

Again lust gives an opportunity for behind the scenes scheming and again the result is the death of an innocent and honourable man.

David and Herod, two kings who are regarded very differently in the Bible but perhaps, if these two stories are anything to go by, they were not so different after all!

The first thing they share in common is envy, David envies Uriah because of his beautiful wife; Herod envies John because of his popularity with the people.

Envy is one of the most destructive of all emotions which is why it has its place in the 10 Commandments.

Envy, covetousness as the Old Testament describes it, destroys relationships. It is like a cancer that eats away at a person until all contentment and satisfaction with life disappears.

Our two stories tell that envy leads on to other things.

David, the all powerful king, sees Bathsheba and is attracted to her. He discovers that she is the wife of another man yet he abuses his power and summons her to the palace.

At his birthday celebrations Herod makes an extravagant promise which everyone at the party overheard.

To save face he had to keep his promise. Herod abused his power and John the Baptist was executed.

Can the leopard change his spots? Can human nature ever be different?

Yesterday people were remembering the awful atrocity of Srebrenica, but that massacre was no worse than some of the things done by Islamic extremists in Syria and Iraq.

When we look at all the appalling things that human beings have done through the centuries; when we look at what is happening in our world today, we might well be inclined to say that things never change, never get better. The leopard's spots never change.

Funny answer No. 2 stands what Jesus really said on its head, 'Jesus enunciated the golden rule, which says to do unto others before they do one to you.' But perhaps what that child said sums up pretty well the current attitude to life.

Envy, lust, greed and the abuse of power seem to infect every part of the relationship between nations, between races, between individuals. It's a pretty depressing picture. Iran and North Korea want to have nuclear weapons because other nations have them. America and Russia promise to reduce their nuclear capability but both still have enough to destroy the world many times over.

It seems that there is no let-up in the awful things we do to one another. It appears that the leopard can never change his spots!

Another flaw in the character of Herod is that he tries to pass the blame for his actions off on somebody else. He is sad at the death of John the Baptist we are told, he didn't really want it to happen, it's really all the fault of Herodias.

At least David accepts responsibility for his actions; but ever since other people have been trying to shift the blame on to Bathsheba.

She knew fine what she was doing when she had a bath on the roof of her house in full view of the palace!

They're really suggesting that it was all her fault

Passing the buck is no new thing either. We read about it in the very first pages of the Bible.

One of the children wrote 'The first commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple'.

Sure enough when God accuses Adam of disobedience his first response is to blame Eve for it all. She told me to do it, he whines. In turn Eve blames the serpent!

History is littered with people who have tried to pass the blame onto someone else. I have to admit that I have done it rather more often than I like to remember. Probably most of us could say the same!

Can the Leopard change his spots – apparently not!

And yet – every year vast sum of money are raised by people running marathons; by people who give to a whole range of charities; by a simple act like putting your loose change in a jar which will finish up buying a cow for an African family or providing simple tools for a village farmer which give his family hope and a chance of life.

I was speaking to someone the other day who confessed that she didn't usually give to beggars on the street but after listening to a radio programme about destitute people she stopped and spoke to a homeless man and put some money in his cup. It must have been a reasonably large amount because he said, 'Thank you, thank you very much'. The lady said to me 'That made me feel so ashamed because I was going to meet some friends for lunch, which would cost 10 times what I gave him.'

Yes, sometimes the leopard can change his spots!

And look at how much money is raised by big events like Children in Need: money given by ordinary people to help some of the poorest in our world. Alongside the harshness of our world so much care; so much kindness; so much love.

Isn't this just what the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, picks up?

Human beings; you and me; are such a mixture of feelings and emotions; of needs and desires; of good bits and not so good bits.

Can the Leopard change its spots? It seems as if it can!

We live in difficult and dangerous times; the first Christians lived in times which were just as difficult and dangerous.

One writer has said 'Dangerous times expose a person's strengths and weaknesses. Dangerous times call for huge acts of faith and courage. Life and death are set before us when dangerous times are on our doorsteps.'

Yes we all have lots of weaknesses; the kind of weaknesses shown by David and by Herod, but there are so many strengths to compensate.

Paul tells his friends in the town of Ephesus 'How great is the grace of God which he gave to us in such large measure'.

That is what gives us hope and confidence in the difficult times, God's grace freely available; the mark of his ownership on each one of us. Through that grace our weaknesses can be supported, our strengths developed and we are empowered to start all over again.

Scripture, history and life all tell us that it is just such frail and fallible people, people like us, that God has used to fulfil his purposes from the very beginning of time and it is still frail and fallible people like you and me that he uses to do his work today.

You may well be familiar with the story of Jesus speaking to the Archangel Gabriel in heaven.

'Jesus,' asked Gabriel, 'what plans have you for your work to be carried on now that you are no longer on earth?'

'Well' replied Jesus, ' I have left my friends Peter, John, James and the rest of them to pass the message on and the people they tell will continue to spread the word until the whole world has heard,'

'But, Jesus, you know how unreliable Peter can be: and what if something happens to John and James before they pass the Good News on?

What if people in the 21st Century get discouraged? What's your Plan B?

'Gabriel, I don't have a Plan B; I'm relying on them!'

We don't know how God works in us; we can never know how he uses us to fulfil his purposes but we do know that he relies on us.

He can change us and fit us for his work, and because of that it is right that we give him thanks and praise.

Can the leopard change his spots?

Can human nature be changed? With God's help it can.

Amen.