

14 July 2024 Amos 7:7-15 and Mark 6:14-29

There are two people I have in mind, both very dear to me. One says, 'why is the Bible called the Good Book? There are so many bad people in it and so many terrible things happen.' The other says wistfully, 'it's too late for me'.

There is a powerful man. He's ambitious, brave in battle, part of a successful dynasty, aware of the political machinations of other power-seekers around him. Of course, he is concerned about keeping his position, quelling enemies, controlling the people around him. Amongst his advisors there is one God-fearing person who is not afraid to tell him the truth.

He has made a diplomatic marriage. However, he has become used to getting what he wants and when that's a woman, well, that's not a problem. He has mistresses after all.

He sees a woman who looks particularly attractive. Seductive even. He doesn't hesitate, he doesn't even try to resist, but his actions lead to disaster, a disaster which has ongoing repercussions. If only he had stopped to think.

She gets pregnant. He arranges for her husband's death and marries her. But, as his wise advisor has warned him, the baby dies. Life does not become any easier, and is fraught with wars, the death of another son, incest and power struggles.

Herod Antipas goes to Rome to assure his position as Tetrarch in Galilee and Perea. He stays with his brother Philip Herod and his eyes light on Philip's wife Herodias. No hesitation. They have to be together. He dismisses his 'diplomatic wife', Phasaelis, and she runs back home (bad news: her father is not happy) and takes Herodias home. She brings a gorgeous daughter with her and the whole sordid story starts again.

This time it's the wise, righteous voice, which is silenced forever. More fighting and more intrigue follow, disputes with Caligula and Agrippa, and Herod Antipas dies in exile.

I imagine you know who the first story is about. David and Bathsheba. The second, as we heard in the reading, Herod and the daughter of Herodias, possibly called Salome. The two stories look remarkably similar, powerful and decisive men, attractive, possibly seductive women. Women led precarious lives at that time. Keeping powerful men happy, even participating in schemes to help them remain in authority, might well have been a way of staying alive and safe. Perhaps Bathsheba bathed on her roof top where she knew that David would see her. Perhaps Herodias was ensuring Salome's survival by having her dance for Herod. She definitely mistrusted John.

However, we know that there is an enormous chasm between the two men in question. Herod is open to Jewish traditions and customs and probably has John imprisoned because he is gathering a large group of followers, who might become troublesome. Herod is nevertheless interested to talk with John, regarding him as a good and righteous man, and is disconcerted when John clearly tells him that he should not have married his brother's wife.

David's advisor is Nathan. Nathan exposes his appalling behaviour, and David is overcome with remorse. Psalm 51 expresses his feelings of devastation, his regret, his repentance, his longing for God's forgiveness, and at the end, his sense that there is indeed hope.

David is still human. Life doesn't go smoothly from that moment on. But he continually calls on God for guidance and is revered as ancestor of our own dear Jesus Christ.

We also had a reading from Amos. Amos, that prophet of justice and righteousness sees God standing with his plumb line, checking to see which of his people, working on building his kingdom, has built a strong, straight wall, and which is trying to disguise a wonky wall. There is disaster for those who fall short. Amos asks us to check our own behaviour with a plumb line, or perhaps a spirit level, to make sure that we are indeed building straight.

As for my own dear friends, how can I respond? Yes, the Bible is full of ordinary people. People who act impulsively, get things wrong, and suffer the

consequences. Among them are rogues who plough on with their own plans regardless and there are people who call on God for help when things go wrong, who ask for forgiveness and rely on the hope which only God can give. That is a wonderful example of how we can live our lives.

As for the other friend, who fears that it is too late, the Bible clearly demonstrates that it is never too late, and that God is always waiting just a prayer away to welcome us back into his family. I just hope my friend will have the courage to believe it.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, please, please, please, gather us into your gentle, loving, forgiving arms.

Send us wise advisors like Nathan and John, and give us the good sense to listen to them, to pause, and consider our impulsive desires before diving in. Give us the courage to ask for your forgiveness when we have got things wrong.

Make us stop and consult Amos; make us measure our decisions with his plumb line as we work on building your kingdom, brick by brick, here in Sunningdale and in the world.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen

Fleur Pelly, 14 July 2024