

Pentecost/Proper 23. October 12, 2014 St. Augustine's, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 25: 1-9, Psalm 23, Philippians 4: 4-13, Matthew 22: 1-14

That's a Holy Week passage. In that context, it's easy to see how, down the ages, the person bound and cast out has been identified with Jesus. Some have also seen the whole of the reading as allegorical - the king is really God.

There's a real problem with that, of course - the first half of the story says that the king is nasty, brutish, murderous, and oppressive, selfish and evil with an explosive temper. Is that the God you know?

The second half is also challenging. A second group of guests is invited to replace the first. Not surprisingly, they show up - wouldn't you, if you saw what happens to those who ignore the king's "invitation?" For one of them too, it also gets worse. All the new guests - no doubt out of fear - have put on the wedding clothes that the host was always required to provide. But one guest refused to put on these clothes. He just wouldn't play the nasty games the king enjoyed. And so this guest was cast into the black dark of the pit. Condemned to a horrible death.

Again, is that the God you know? It isn't remotely like any sort of picture that Jesus presents elsewhere of God.

Nor does King = God fit the context of this story, which is the Institutional authorities wanting to know where Jesus' authority comes from. So this can't be about God.

So! What is the context for this parable?

Jesus listeners would know of a king who was "nasty, brutish, murderous, oppressive...who [was] selfish, evil, and ha[d] an explosive temper": Herod the Great.

And if we were to check-in with one of the primary sources of First Century context - the Jewish historian Josephus - we'd find that he describes events very similar to the ones in the parable.

Herod wasn't, strictly speaking, Jewish. He was descended from Edolmites and many Jews considered him half-Jewish at best. So he needed legitimacy. The best way was through a wedding - he married the daughter of the king he overthrew, who also happened to be the Chief Priest at the Temple.

So there's a literal wedding. Herod also dealt in metaphor - in this case he was trying to "marry" himself into Judaism by becoming the Jewish king. Most Jews refused this "invitation" so Herod imposed his will by force - he asked his overlords - the Romans - to act on his behalf by storming Jerusalem. The streets, Josephus tells us, ran with blood. Bodies were piled up in the alleys and byways. As the parable says of the King: "He sent his troops, destroyed those [people], and burned their city."

And there was also - in the real events of Herod's forced ascension - the casting out of someone into the "outer darkness" (i.e. "Death"), which was the previous King, Antigonus(Ann-tig-O-nus), who was murdered by the Romans at Herod's request.

So who, in this parable, is the guest/victim who intentionally refuses the robes of the King? The action of rejecting the robes offered by the king is obviously highly symbolic - a rejection of all that the king stood for. We might say that Jesus was thinking of himself - actually Matthew might well have thought that. But most likely Jesus wanted his audience to remember their Prophets - our Prophets - and Isaiah in particular. Because there's a great deal in the content of this parable and of the actions of the disrobed guest that echo a figure out of the book of Isaiah. The familiar title of that figure is the Suffering Servant. We hear references to this Suffering Servant very frequently in Lent and Holy Week, because he's understood as synonymous with Jesus.

So you can see that this parable is certainly not about God, but about Herod, and about the way that those in power act toward those who proclaim back to them their oppressive ways.

So why did Jesus tell this parable? Remember the context for the parable? A confrontation with "the authorities" - meaning those who had gotten just a little too close to Herod and to the Romans - who were viewed by many as collaborators. They had asked Jesus about his teaching and healing: "By what authority do you teach in this way?"

Jesus' answer was, in essence, the authority of the suffering servant.

"I stand with the Prophets and share in their authority" is what Jesus is saying to these institutional leaders. "I am willing to suffer your violence to do so."

"Jesus' answer, that his way of confronting them – of "suffering their violence" must have been disturbing to them and they ask the question that naturally follows: "Who gave you this authority?" The answer is one of the great insights and one of the great ironies of the gospel. Jesus' answer to them is, "every leader like you has been giving this authority throughout time to those whom you oppress – every prophet who is persecuted is granted the authority to speak out against injustice by the oppressors who have oppressed her or him.

"And you are now continuing in that sad line, giving me this authority."

Jesus knew that this stand would be dangerous – mortally dangerous. As Paul reminds us, he was willing to make that sacrifice.

This is all very well, you might say, but that was then, this is now.

This is a passage that challenges us to explore what sacrificial living means *for us*.

Speaking only for myself, I know that it's easy to say in public what I believe. Heck, we sing that every week. It's not quite so easy for me to reflect that belief in prayer - prayer isn't easy for many of us, I think. But neither belief nor prayer is particularly costly in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America.

Jesus invites us to a costly way of living; we're being invited not to put on the clothes of culture or empire

And that costly way of living, the thing that brings us into a place of conflict with "the powers that be" - or, to use the language of Ephesians, the "principalities and powers" of this world - is when we stand up and do something because our faith demands it of us:

- we're being faithful when we oppose by our actions as well as our words the destructive powers of human beings;
- we're being faithful when we confront the evil ways that the working poor are exploited by large corporations,
- we're being faithful when we oppose the 10% who think that free, unfettered, private access to firearms is a good thing;
- we're being faithful when we challenge those in positions of dominance within our culture who treat the least of us as 2<sup>nd</sup> class people;
- we're being faithful when we object to and act against those who are destroying our planet for greed and gain;
- we're being faithful when we cry out "enough" and then work to change the way mega-banks destroy peoples lives with "credit default swaps" and then get off scott-free.

When we do these things we will discover what the costly way of living that lies at the heart of Christian faith is really all about.

We'll discover it because there's always push-back when we act in these ways; push-back not by "those who have", but by "those who have way too much." We have responsibility to be a part of the cultural conversation about wealth and poverty, war and peace, justice and exploitation. If we are not a part of that conversation we're failing as people of faith.

There's a book that was given to me a few weeks ago by one of you by a French economist named "Thomas Piketty." It's 800 pages long and has the somewhat boring, seemingly innocuous title of "Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." It's been described as the most important economics book of the decade." Actually you can drop the word "economics" out of that quote!

With searing insight Piketty describes how capital, and especially substantial inherited capital (AKA net worth), increases in greater value than that of the ordinary person's net worth. Inexorably, he says, this means that capital will become concentrated in the hands of very few people.

Piketty says

“...social scientists, like all intellectuals and all citizens, ought to participate in public debate. They cannot be content to invoke grand but abstract principles such as justice, democracy, and world peace. They must make choices and take stands in regard to specific institutions and policies, whether it be the social state, the tax system, or the public debt. Everyone is political in his or her own way. The world is not divided between a political elite on one side and, on the other, an army of commentators and spectators whose only responsibility is to drop a ballot in a ballot box every four or five years.” (Thomas Piketty *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* p. 574)

You can see the pattern from the beginning of time: you can see it in the origins of Israel itself in the Book of Judges; you can see it in the New Testament’s opposition to Empire; you can see it in the Reformation; you can see it in the French and American Revolutions. The social injustice that - in our day - is a consequence for the rest of us ( that’s all of us here today) will, he says, be incalculable. If we object, history tells us that those with power will exercise it. They act like Herod. Some people die. Everyone else suffers.

Martin Niemoeller’s famous poem about what happened in 1930's Germany is absolutely germane here:

First they came for the Jews  
and I did not speak out  
because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists  
and I did not speak out  
because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists  
and I did not speak out  
because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Catholics,  
and I did not speak up because I was a Protestant.

Then they came for me  
and there was no one left  
to speak out for me.

If there was ever a time when we could say “We’re all in this together,” this is that time. Jesus’ story, inviting not simply a comparison with what happened to the prophets but reminding his followers of the likely consequences from them is a cautionary tale for us, too. We are called not just to pray - though praying’s a very good thing! - but to act; to speak out, to find ways to oppose the injustice of amoral capitalism (hear me: not “of capitalism” but of “amoral capitalism”) and propose, instead, the vision of God and of God’s kingdom we find in the Gospels and Paul.

What would the world look like, I wonder, if we acted in the ways proposed by Jesus and Paul? For we are called to work for that new Kingdom, one where the great banquet supper will take place, where the poor and needy will no longer need a refuge, one where the lion will lie down with the lamb, where swords will be beaten into shovels, and spears into garden rakes. “It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber.” Jesus in today’s gospel is inviting us to be disciples, pilgrims on that shared journey home to God. The challenge for us is this: how are we to respond?