

Homily for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B 2018)

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It is interesting that the theme of the first reading and the gospel today refer to royals, considering that all this past week the theme of the day camp was “Kingdom Rock”. And as you can see in the area of the church hall on full display is the massive crown, which is quite an attraction to people who drive by.

As we look to scripture today, though, there is not too much that is wonderful on the topic of the royals. In our first reading, we have a great joyous celebration as we witness the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant being processed into Jerusalem, to be put into a respectful place.

And we hear of great celebration, music and dancing. Yet we are jarred by one sharp line: *“Michal, daughter of Saul, looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord. And she despised him in her heart.”*

In order to understand this a little bit more clearly, we need some of the backstory. Yes, previously Michal very much loved David. She even protected him from her father, King Saul, who wanted to kill him, and who made several attempts at this.

David escaped Saul’s wrath, and later under some deception, Saul gave Michal in marriage to someone else. And David marries other wives. Again, Michal loved David, but we never hear that David loved her back.

Later on in the story, David demands Michal back for whatever reason. The point is this: David was a great and powerful leader, yes. As a husband – well – (let’s just leave it there) no not everything is wonderful in this royal existence that we have just heard about.

Then we have the strangest segment from Mark’s gospel concerning the death of John the Baptist. All during these past few weeks, I have been reflecting on Mark, stating that this gospel is so abrupt, brief in its descriptions, and to the point. There is a fast pace to it – no time to catch your breath. Often we hear the phrase “immediately this or that happened”.

Yet today we have this long drawn out recounting of how John the Baptist dies. Very strange indeed. But why? Why does Mark place so much energy on this story, halfway through Jesus’ public ministry? We don’t even hear a mention of Jesus in today’s passage.

Well...What I have been talking about these last few weeks in my homilies? I have been talking about, what is a parable. I’ve stated that a parable means throwing two realities beside each other – two contrasting realities. On one hand the reign of God, on the other, the reign of this world. And today’s gospel is saying a lot about the reign of this world.

Just like in the first reading, not everything is great in the royal existence that we hear about. There is trouble in this royal family. Herod divorced his first wife, married Herodias, his brother-

in-law's wife, while his brother-in-law is still alive. John the Baptist calls him out on this. John is arrested and rots in jail.

And Herod throws himself a birthday party and brags and shows off his supposed power to his guests. He wants to impress his guests, and in the process makes an outrageous drunken promise to his stepdaughter as she dances before him.

Herodious, in her hatred of John the Baptist, exploits the situation and even her own daughter, and sees a chance to kill John the Baptist. And through her daughter demands his gruesome death.

Herod in all of this is too gutless to say no. He'd rather be taken for a murderer than look weak. And the royal household portrays pathetic values –even no values at all.

Some might wonder if that is judgment. No, it is parable. And the parable points back at the situation and reveals the situation back in its face.

Which is in some ways this story reflects values that we might even hear about or see around us with those who are in power currently – those who are driven so much by ego, or money, or corruption, or lies, or illusions, ideologies, violence, greed, fame, and so on.

And what do we compare, or throw alongside, this vision of the world's reign? I might suggest two things. First, simply go to the very next part of chapter 6 in Mark, as Jesus feeds the 5,000. And we hear that all who ate were filled, and none were left hungry.

Or simply look to the epistle for today. *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will."*

As we see, this is so rich, so much in contrast with the reign we see in Herod's story. This is the way that is promised, this is the life, the truly royal life that we are called into. Hear those words, *"In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance."*

May we live into that inheritance with the good news and hope this reveals to us.