

2 Pentecost, Year B, June 7, 2015; St. Mary & Timothy, Sylvan Lake
1 Sam. 8:4-11,[12-15]16-20, 11:14-15; Psalm 138;
2 Cor. 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35;

We are in the season of the Church Year known as the Season after Pentecost and we have left behind, until next Advent, themed readings for each Sunday. In the Season after Pentecost the Old Testament readings are chosen from particular portions of the Bible and read semi-continuously and the portion we are focusing on for some weeks has to do with the beginning of kings in Israel so we will be reading about Saul and David particularly. The Psalm always reflects themes from the Old Testament reading. Different Epistles are also being read semi-continuously and our Gospel readings will move between Mark and John. This means that my method of preaching is upset as it is not so easy to weave the themes from the readings together. So I am just going to address the major points from each reading in succession.

The reading from 1 Samuel concerns the demand from the Israelites to have a king so that they can be like the other nations. Chapter 8 presents one point of view, the negative one, on the whole notion of having a king in order to be like the other nations. Samuel is outraged at this request and takes it as a personal rejection. But God says, no it is not you they are rejecting, it is me, and this is a continuation of the pattern of these people – they have always rejected me and then come back and then rejected me again.

So, give them their king, God says, but warn them about how kings operate. They take the best of everything away from the people and give it to their favourites. They take the riches of the land and give them to their favourites, they take the children of the land from their families and give them jobs to keep the monarchy running, and the upshot of this is that they make all the people their slaves. We remember that it is not so long historically from this point in the Biblical story since the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and God delivered them from slavery. Here they are expressing a desire for a political system that will make them slaves all over again. Monarchy as a political reality and covenant with God as a theological reality do not mix together well. Samuel warns the people that if they choose to have a king, there will come a time when they are going to be unhappy

with their kings and they are going to want God to do something about that, and God is not going to respond to that request.

So, a number of points to think about are raised here: a) how does our faith in God influence our political choices? We know from our recent provincial election that some people are politically optimistic and others are prophesying doom because a different party has formed the government. b) how does our desire to be like others affect our faith in God? Does it make us more or less willing to speak of our beliefs and to account for why we hold them? c) what are the implications for faith that God puts limits on the way he exercises his power in the world? d) you can probably think of some more issues that this story raises for us.

The reading from 2 Corinthians reminds us that we live in an atmosphere of hope because of God's work in the person of Jesus Christ and God's invitation to us to enter into Christ's life. Because we believe we are able to speak about our hope in God and live out of our hope in God in all areas of life. St. Paul speaks of the reality of afflictions in our daily life but makes the point that how we deal with these afflictions prepares us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.

He likens our bodies to tents which of course are temporary shelters, and mobile shelters, and he says these will all be destroyed but we will receive from God a building not made with hands that is eternal in the heavens. Everything is for the purpose of extending God's grace to more and more people in order that thanksgiving may increase to God's glory. And therefore, in the midst of whatever afflictions there are we do not lose heart.

When we are subject to afflictions of varying severity our tendency is to ask Why me? But the real question should be why not me? Even the most serious disasters in our life are common to the human condition so they are not a case of God singling us out for punishment but just part of our everyday humanity. And how we deal with them speaks volumes about the nature of our faith in God.

The gospel reading has two stories, one of them tucked inside the other, which is a recurring device in Mark's gospel. Jesus is at home, that is, in a house, and there is such a crowd that he and his disciples cannot even eat a meal. His family hears about it and they go toward this house in order to restrain Jesus, for people are saying that he is out of his mind. When his mother and his brothers come they send a message into the house calling him to come out to them. The crowd is sitting all around him and they say to Jesus 'your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you.' And Jesus looks at those sitting around him and says 'here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Here is a story about our identity again. Jesus says his biological family is not the be all and the end all in relationships. He has been called to certain work in God's service and he is not going to dignify attempts by his family to distract him from that service to God. He offers to us this challenge: are we prepared to become part of his family, a family that serves God, by doing the will of God in whatever place or way we are serving God? It doesn't mean that we are to reject and ignore the other members of our family, but it does say that if we accept what God has done to us and for us in Jesus Christ then God's will is always our first consideration.

Inside that story is another one. The scribes come down to this house from Jerusalem and they are saying about Jesus that he has Beelzebul, or Satan, the chief of demons and by Beelzebul he casts out other demons. Jesus says they make no sense because Satan cannot cast himself out of anywhere. If a kingdom is divided against itself it cannot stand. A house divided against itself cannot stand. If Satan is risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand but has come to his end. But, he says, if someone enters a strong man's house and binds up the strong man then he can plunder the strong man's property at will. Jesus concludes by saying that people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of eternal sin. His reason for speaking these words is that the scribes have said of him, who is filled with the Holy Spirit, that he has an unclean spirit.

People often get into agonies about whether or not they have committed this unforgiveable sin. Since the commission of it involves deliberately repudiating God and God's work in the world, the fact that anyone is uncertain about whether they have committed this sin is probably a good indication that they haven't.

The point about houses or kingdoms being unable to stand if they are divided against themselves is relevant to any institution or organization but particularly to the Church. We cannot speak with any integrity about the love of Jesus to other people if we don't exhibit it towards others ourselves. We aren't responsible for other people's words and actions but we are responsible for our own, and if we have spoken out of anger or other strong emotions then we have to make amends even if the other person behaved badly as well. Our repentance, our apologies are not contingent on the other person's apologies to us.

All of us need God's grace, mercy and compassion just to get through a normal day never mind one fraught with conflict. As those who have been baptized into the life and death of Jesus Christ we are to be careful not to be the cause of division and strife ourselves. And then, and this always seems unfair, we are to be the first to make overtures of reconciliation to others, regardless of how those will be received.

Jesus has bound the strong man, Satan, and plundered his house, so that we may live lives of praise and thanksgiving to God, loving one another as Christ has loved us.

Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.