

Let our good works give glory to God

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost + 7b 11-7-21 – 2 Sam 6 1-5 12b-19 Ps 24 Eph 1 1-14
Mk 6 14-29

I've just negotiated a week with my brothers and my sister under our Mum's supervision as we closed down her home and distributed her belongings to various people and causes. Despite odd miscommunications and our differing perspectives, we're all still on really good terms with each other. We have no regrets about any decisions we made. But we did have our moments; families can be really awkward. This morning's scriptures remind us just how dysfunctional families can be.

Today, we saw King David establish Jerusalem as the spiritual and political capital of the Jewish people. It's a pivotal moment in their history and ours. And yet there's a nasty little family moment in the story that's quite puzzling. In great joy, stripped down to a simple priestly cape, David danced with all his might before the Ark of the Lord as it was brought into the city. But then we're told ¹⁶ ... *[David's wife] Michal ... looked out of the window, and saw [him] leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart.Why?*

There's only one hint, and it comes just after today's passage. When David got home, Michal greeted him by saying, ²⁰ ...*How the king of Israel honoured himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of ... female servants, as ... vulgar fellows shamelessly uncover [themselves]!* Our Bible study group speculated about Michal's spite. Did she simply find liturgical dance embarrassing? Were there issues in their marriage? There certainly were. But why did the writers

highlight this particular moment of tension? And what are we to do with it today?

The equivalent issue now seems to be when a family member gets religion and the rest of the family find it very, very embarrassing. It would be interesting to chat about that together. When I announced my call to ordained ministry to my parents and siblings, their response was quite varied. They'd known me all my life, and so they had quite a bit of history to set against what they made of clergy in general.

There was puzzlement; lukewarm acceptance – *Well, if that's what you really want to do*. It ended up as a bit of a no-go zone in our conversations for some years. It's tricky, isn't it. Your family's opinion is so important – you want to look after those relationships. But does that mean you only do something if they like it?

In the end, you can't let a desire for people's good opinion get in the way of doing what you believe is your responsibility – even if they're your family. Imagine if David had been in the middle of his dance, glimpsed Michal's face in the window and stopped. He went on dancing, oblivious to her contempt, and the rest is history.

We see the reverse of this in the Gospel today with Herod giving priority to his guests' good opinion. Herod was giving a birthday party in his own honour. He counted the good opinion of his male guests so highly that he was prepared to expose his stepdaughter to them and then commit murder to honour a drunken promise they'd witnessed. As our psalmist puts it, Herod *set his soul on an idol*; in this case, mistaking his popularity for his honour.

So our readings today put a choice before us that we all face very often – as a group and as individuals – between what we believe God truly wants of us, and what makes us look good; between honouring God, and preening ourselves.

Today's Epistle tells us it's not just a matter of personal choice. It's a family matter for us too. We heard in the letter to the Ephesian Christians that ⁴ *[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.* ⁵ *[God] destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.*

The Christians of Ephesus are being reminded that they've been adopted into God's family, and that this has implications for their conduct, even in the face of rejection from their 'old family' – who were mostly worshippers of Artemis. Ephesus was a major centre of Artemis worship. Her temple there was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. When the Ephesian Christians became followers of Jesus, they were adopted into a new family – an incredibly counter-cultural move in any traditional society – and not much less extraordinary for us.

We're like the Ephesians. As Gentile Christians, we have the honour of being adopted as members of God's family, with all the privileges and responsibilities that go with it. For some of us, that means we've renounced our birth families too – or been renounced by them.

However we became part of this family, what that change means in Biblical language is that *now our lives reflect on the honour of God's name*. What people see Christians do affects how they can know what God is like. So the way the Church has protected its reputation and its power has tarnished God's good name.

We are part of God's family. The way people see us treat each other or anyone else is on display. What we say to each other; what we say about each other; what we do; the choices we make; who we include and who we leave outside – it's all on display. We are to let [our] light shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [God]. ^{Mt 5.16}

Amen

