

“Good Trumps Evil” – Mark 6:14-29

Right at the beginning let me say that I am using the word “trump” in my sermon title here in the sense in which it is used in the card game of bridge, not through any connection with the latest and loudest Republican presidential candidate. Using any reference to that person would tend to be the total opposite of what I meant by the title! My title – which I chose on Tuesday after a grueling but productive consultants’ meeting re the new building – arises not only from the Mark reading but also the selection from Amos. We’ll be looking at both those readings this morning mostly because they share both a similar reflection on the world but also because they both point to God’s grace in a world that is not only imperfect but can be downright nasty.

Let’s work backwards, and start with the more recent reading, the one from Mark’s gospel, the salubrious tale offering in great detail the demise of John the Baptizer. A king, a banquet, dancing girls, a scheming and plotting mother, revenge and death – this could be a scene from any of the increasingly grotesque TV ‘reality’ shows – or for that matter from just about any palace from across the history of royalty. This is in many ways a truly strange story from Mark’s gospel. There is that confusing issue of both the daughter and the mother being identified with the name Herodias, but that’s really just a minor distraction. The really, really confusing part, at least to me, is the amount of detail.

I find the amount of detail to be confusing because in almost every other area Mark is astonishingly brief. For example, the entire ministry of John the Baptizer is covered in only five short verses, whereas here his demise takes more than three times that amount of text. Moreover Jesus is introduced, baptized, acknowledged by God as his Son, and spends 40 days tempted in the wilderness also in five short verses, as contrasted with the sixteen verses describing how and why John met his terrible end. This amount of detail and narrative is really, really unusual for Mark who moves with breathtaking speed immediately from one brief but significant episode to the next.

While the length of the description of the events is curious, the intent of the full story is clear enough. Our reading opens with “King Herod heard of it...” and the ‘it’ to which the story refers is the success of the disciples in healing and casting out demons as they had been sent out by Jesus. There seems to have been some confusion in Israel as to who was the one doing the messianic deeds – was it John or was it Jesus, or was it another major prophet returned from the dead? For Herod the issue was a little bit clearer, because John had already started making prophetic utterances, namely a condemnation to Herod against his marrying his brother’s wife, and Herod had responded as kings tended to do by having John arrested and thrown in prison. This echoes the similar treatment of Amos we see in that reading, who also ran afoul not only of the king but of the religious leaders and was encouraged to flee.

I suspect not many of you are familiar with the Book of Amos, which is too bad because it is a fascinating work about a prophetic figure who not only spoke a relevant word to his own day but a word that resonates in our world today as well. Amos lived some 850 years before Jesus, in much the same region of Israel north of Jerusalem. He self-describes himself as “not a prophet nor a prophet’s son but a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees” and from this the popular understanding is of him as a simple shepherd. I have a rather different take on that, and I see him as more comparable to the owner of a huge sheep station in Australia or the owner of a major agricultural business in California. The reason I believe this is two-fold: on the one hand he had access to both the top religious leaders and to the king, and on the other hand his words were known and remembered and recorded. For either or both of those to have happened he

could not have been a simple, uneducated hillside shepherd, but rather an educated man of some importance in the community.

While Amos may have claimed not to be a prophet, he still felt called by God to deliver God's messages to the people of Israel, which is the role of a prophet. The messages he brought spoke against the politics and lifestyle of his day. Two major themes echo throughout the Book of Amos: complaints about how the politicians were relying upon their own perceived wisdom, clever lies, and guile to work complicated alliances with neighbouring states instead of relying upon God; and complaints against the rich and powerful – including or especially the religious leaders – who were using their wealth and positions of power to abuse the poor. The messages carried warnings to Israel that if they did not change their ways, if they did not repent and turn back to heeding God's call for justice and truth then disaster would strike through the agency of a conquering nation. Amos' words are remembered in part because not many years later the alliances did indeed collapse and the Assyrians did conquer the northern part of Israel and forcefully relocated all throughout their empire.

We don't have to look very far to see parallels in today's world with the situations in both Amos' day and Jesus' time. The rich still prey upon the poor; the politicians still lie like rugs because they would never get elected if they did tell the truth – people really don't want to hear the truth. Our political scenes here perhaps don't quite reflect the “bunga-bunga” parties of some European leaders (at least we haven't heard of any!) but truth is still both relative and a victim of circumstance at all levels, and injustice seems to be floating down the river like an oil slick. Please note that I have to be really careful here that I don't cross some invisible line that has recently been drawn in Canada – the Canada Revenue Agency is, presumably with the encouragement of the federal Government, cracking down on religious charities, and anyone who preaches “a political message” runs the risk of having the charitable status of the church revoked. It's not exactly clear where that line is, but it is clear that stepping over it carries huge financial penalties, and thus provides a muzzling effect perhaps not quite as serious as losing one's head, but still significant.

So, is all doom and gloom? Is there no grace to be found anywhere, not even or especially in these prophetic works? Well, I contend that the grace of God is not only evident in both these works but his grace continues to be freely available for those who choose to hear and respond. If we look just ahead of our Amos reading we discover Amos in dialogue with God, who shows the prophet two visions of impending disaster – one of locusts devouring the crops (actually the second cutting, the one for the farmer as the first cutting was the property of the king) and one of fire raining down to “devour the great deep and eat up the land”. Amos protests that Jacob (Israel) is small and weak, and so twice God relents and declares “it shall not be” and then we see the third vision of the plumb line, denoting that instead of total devastation the rich and powerful would be measured and found wanting. Throughout the entire Book of Amos we see many other powerful pronouncements against those who would oppress the poor, who would practice injustice, and a constant continuing call to the people of God to change their ways and exhibit the justice and mercy desired by God.

There is also grace evident even in the reading from Mark's gospel. We note the whole tragic and evil incident was triggered by the good news proclaimed and enacted by Jesus and his disciples. Not much has changed as still today we see evidence of good news and good deeds provoking fear and reaction from those who build their fortunes and enhance their power through self-aggrandizing and less-than-noble activities. And yet, even in the tragic story of John the Baptist's gruesome death a little kindness shows through as his disciples lovingly took his body

and laid it in a tomb. The final act in that gory drama was one of tenderness, and caring, and compassion – the very characteristics and responses that God calls for from his people and the same that were demonstrated by Jesus in his ministry, and in his death and resurrection. Goodness was not destroyed by Herod's cruel action, and goodness still prevails today through the actions of those who hear and respond to God's constant call for justice, for mercy, for compassion, for us to treat all persons with dignity and respect.

So yes, the world can seem to be and often is a cruel place where people exhibit tyranny instead of grace and the abuses of political and religious power still continue as long as we have political and religious systems. But hopefully we can also see that the message of God's grace, offered in covenant after covenant by God with people who would respond and expressed throughout all of the bible is not only also constant but the one constant that will outlast all of the clever schemes of people. Let us ever give thanks to God for his constant love, grace, and mercy, and may we ever try to exhibit the grace and goodness that does triumph over evil.