

6th Sunday 2017

The second reading gives “not wisdom from the leaders of this age, which is passing away, but God’s wisdom: hidden, mysterious, eternal” (1 Corinthians 2: 2-7). The trouble is God’s wisdom is *sometimes* hidden in that of transient leaders, and sometimes *not*. God’s wisdom comes mediated. So we must discern and decipher it: not an easy task.

Saul, David, Solomon. The presidents of ancient Israel, a trinity. We detect differences and common threads. There are different styles of leadership, different understandings of reality. As in Bush, Obama, Trump. As in Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison: founding fathers now on Broadway. As in Francis, Benedict, John Paul. One a superstar on Peter’s chair, the next a retiring intellectual, followed by a people-person with uncomfortable ideas about simplicity. Dare I notice different leadership styles in the trinity? The Father’s demanding sovereign authority, shown by high demands in the sermon on the mount; the slippery elusiveness of the Spirit (often thought of as wisdom personified); the Son having a mission thrust but also a mystifying bent towards self-defeat? Bush, Obama, Trump. Their counterparts: Saul, David, Solomon. Not a one-to-one correspondence, but, between the groups, a number of correspondences. Each leader a messiah-figure, each expressing (some) wisdom.

In early days (not a golden age), Israel was ruled by thugs. Later spin dignified them as judges. Hypocritical Gideon defeating Philistines in public but hedging his bets with a pagan shrine in back; muscle-man Samson, short on brains, losing his strength to delectable Delilah. Spiritual gravity came with the prophet Samuel. Like America’s founders he felt there should be no king. The people agitated; Samuel caved in. He gave them King Saul, glamorous, handsome—something we have seen before, a regular guy. My heart goes out to Saul, having inherent mental difficulties; without the violence tendency I have inherited some myself. Today we understand their genetic aspect, fact not flaw, not subject to will-power. In moments of awareness Saul was anguished by the destructive qualities of his narcissism, paranoia, and volatility. Jealously attacking David for winning popularity polls, lashing out, Saul initiated a civil war he could not win or control. Hating himself, he chooses suicide over humiliation and public defeat. He deserves not contempt but compassion, as flawed leaders also deserve--which does not mean letting them run wild.

In an ironic twist, Saul’s son Jonathan, rightful successor, casts his emotional lot with David, yet dies defending his father’s cause. The deaths of Saul and Jonathan inspire from David the most beautiful elegy in scripture. We often recognize beauty, see the possibility of *what could have been*, after we lose it, when it is too late.

Second to his descendant Jesus, David is the most complex character in scripture. Sheep, harp, slingshot. They symbolize David’s innocence, music, courage in giant-killing. But his greatest moment may be moving the nation’s greatest treasure, the ark containing the commandments, to a permanent home on Jerusalem’s Zion. This causes the jubilant dancing before the ark which charismatic David does nothing to suppress; in fact he leads it. Bitter backlash from Saul’s daughter show that previous administrations never quite die.

Some would identify this ark-moment with the symbolic elation of 2008. Others argue that David as outsider, ignoring the rules, represents 2016. David was an underdog: good with people but unwise in personal life. Like a recent president, David embarrasses himself by personal weakness. Passionate, his personality the antithesis of a no-drama manner, David’s charisma which is an external projection. Like nearly all leaders (though we always forget this), he cannot live up to the public’s need for a hero. His family and followers desert him. Like Saul, he dies grieving.

Yet, perversely, over time, in the strange re-editing of history, the flawed and wounded David becomes the prototype of an ultimate spiritual messiah. Strange too that the woman he exploited, whose husband David killed as cover-up, becomes empowered as oppressed people should and must. They find a voice. Bathsheba insists her son Solomon, not the elder sibling, become the next leader. The exploited female survivor becomes ancestor to Jesus the messiah. Bathsheba, woman in a pantsuit, gallantly waving.

Solomon represents prosperity and stability, what the populace longs for. He builds the temple; Sheba's queen swoons over his achievements. Like all leaders, even popes, Solomon has shortcomings. The effects of these shortcomings become obvious only after Solomon's dazzling performance. They cause the nation to splinter and dissolve, never to recover. Yet the permanent legacy Solomon leaves is wisdom.

From failure comes wisdom. If we give the paschal mystery more than lip-service (which is unlikely), we know that from defeat comes triumph. Solomon's legacy is not the temple or economy or diplomacy, not political achievements, but wisdom. According to legend he received this gift in childhood as from a fairy godmother when asked in a dream for his ultimate wish. Wisdom never comes so magically. Good and bad, weak and strong, presidents illuminate this mystery when leaving office. In the generous letter to a successor on the oval office desk; in the humanitarian efforts of Jimmy Carter; in the astonishing friendship between Bill and H.W., fashioned by relief trips to places in distress.

I was very consoled last month by a front-page article about our outgoing President's reading, books that nourished his soul during eight lonely, challenging years. Not that he was unique; his predecessor read deeply too. The article hints at moral leadership that only ex-presidents can give. This one prepared to become emeritus reading not only Lincoln and Dr. King (authors we expect for him), but plays of Shakespeare and novels of Marilynne Robinson. I suspect Robinson's sense of moral vicissitudes through history appealed to him. The generations-story of *Gilead* starts with a fiery white abolitionist preacher in the Midwest whose descendants wrestle with his moral ambiguities—maybe not so different from Obama's own genealogy? Reading Robinson, Obama gets into the heads of voters repudiating his legacy. In Shakespeare he discovers the tragic failures of idealism. The article concludes, "I read to enter the life of a person going through hardship. I learn that hardship is not just pain. Hardship is joy and glory and mystery." According to the second reading, the last noun, *mystery*, is an attribute of God's wisdom, not the passing wisdom from leaders of this age.

We eagerly await more insights. They come with quiet dignity from every ex-president and need more attention. We hope they will come someday from the current office-holder. Our leaders, good and bad, represent us. Pondering them, we can, instead of accusing and blaming, ponder in ourselves the good to affirm, the bad to challenge. We can ponder the mysterious joy and glory in our pain, move towards the scarred tranquility of wisdom. Like Christ our presidential leader, we may--possibly, not automatically--find resurrection in the cross.

But did you notice the first ladies at the inauguration? Like Bathsheba, reluctant and unelected, they express deep truths and take the high road. Their non-verbal statements have power, like the sacramental truth transcending homiletical error during the liturgy. Each lady wore the color of the opposing political party, while the men's power-ties defensively displayed the red and blue partisanship of the wearers. Then came the unexpected Tiffany box, blue, the color of the recipient. Shyly offered, it brought the comic problem of where to put it down. Finally, the recipient's husband stowed it inside the hallway he was about to leave. To a painful situation the present brought grace. It was like a gift from the Magi, who did not fully

understand the one to whom they paid tribute. We do not know what was in it. We must guess and imagine; it remains *mystery*. From inside the box, from the hidden soul, it sang, like David's elegy, of beauty that is finished, yet may not be completely gone.

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