

It Ain't Easy – Pent+4B

It isn't easy being King. For one thing, everybody is always taking sides, either with you or against you; nobody just accepts you as a regular person, with flaws and fears, accomplishments and weaknesses; it's lonely at the top. We are reminded of one life, Rodney King's of Los Angeles, who was not interested in being king of anything, just wanted to be himself, and got forced into the spotlight of world attention by the terrible violence inflicted on him by others. His response, once he recovered enough to make one, was "Why can't we all just get along?" A question that sadly seems all too pitiful. He died young and unhappy, unwilling to be a hero, just wanting to get along: a unjustly disappointing symbol of our times.

There are others. The name, "King" is most famously spoken by Americans when we talk about the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. who was so divisive as to draw fatal gunfire, but whose words continue to ring out in demand of peace among the people of our land, a peace as yet unrealized: words like, "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred." He recognized that peace will only be realized when it is based on the sharing of power and privilege. which people will not do without struggle. And struggle is almost always won by the powerful. It's not easy being such a target as he was; it was lonely on his mountaintop. Likewise John F. Kennedy, who met an untimely and violent death, and whose tenure in the White House was nicknamed Camelot because he seemed like such a king. He exhorted us to, "Ask not what your country can do for you;

ask what you can do for your country.” Substitute ‘neighbor’ for ‘country’ and you can see how his words strike at the empty heart of privilege and oppression. And there is our stupendous American phenomenon, Elvis, the King of Rock and Roll: Stardom and its expectations led to addiction, mistakes, loneliness and likewise an early and violent death.

This is a day when fathers around the country come up against their own kingship, if you will. Not that our households are ruled by men any more, in all the ways they once were, *danks Gott*; but fathers do have all-too kingly duties in families, and at this time of graduations, commencement ceremonies and life changes, fatherhood often comes into focus. My own children have finished school and gone off to work in the big city. My time as their domestic leader, as their benevolent dictator, their king if you will, has come to an end, whether I like it or not; whether I have been a good king or not. I know that they go in peace from me, despite my mistakes. But the question is: will I go in peace without my former subjects, or will I try to find someone else to rule?

I have a dear friend whose son has revealed his sexual orientation as gay this week. The son is in his early twenties; the friend, 60-something. Many of us surmised the lad’s inclination years ago, but the subject has not been discussed with his father, much less his grandfather. For the most part, the women: sister, mother, grandmothers, are cool about it, but the taboo amongst the men, amongst the kings has been – until now -- total. Now his father has to let go of the expectation, which for him has been strong,

that his son (and namesake) will be like him. His son is going in peace, but will Dad? They're still not talking about it with the grandfather.

Today we heard about another King, Saul, whose mistakes and violence almost succeed in ripping his country apart, but who still thinks he is right about everything. When the natural method of kingly succession, which would result in his own son being made king, is abandoned by Saul, the people become loyal to a new hero, David, and choose him as their heir-apparent. Saul is not happy. To make matters worse, his own son, Jonathan immediately recognizes the new king and supports him. At one point Saul orders that Jonathan be killed, but the soldiers refuse to obey.

Depending on how you interpret the text, Jonathan either gives his complete political and spiritual allegiance to David the minute they meet, or literally falls in love with David and becomes his intimate...or both. The genius of the scripture is in the way it makes us understand and accept that both interpretations are valid and lead to the same place: the king must relinquish his power. Change is happening. The sons will go, the people will move on. It's only a question of whether the king will depart in peace. Everybody's talking 'bout the new kid in town; they will never forget you Saul, til somebody new comes along.

Instead, Saul tries to spear David to the wall in the palace while David is playing his lyre (presumably in the music room). He tries to spear him twice and misses both times. Among the future king David's accomplishments, we

remember, is the composition of the Psalms, like this one, Number 9: Perhaps this is what he was singing when Saul came around the corner with a spear and tried to pin him to the wall:

The Lord will judge the world with justice, who will judge the peoples with his truth. The Kings have fallen into the pit themselves have made; their feet are caught in the snare they laid. The wicked are snared in the work of their own hands, for the needy shall not always be forgotten nor the hope of the poor be in vain. Arise, Lord, let violent men not prevail. Let all kings be judged before you, strike them with terror and let them know they are but men. For only the Lord sits enthroned forever, who has set up the throne of judgment.

And our text tells us that the Lord left Saul, because he could not relinquish his kingship, because he could not let go. Just as the Lord will leave all kings and demagogues whose powers may be far beyond those of common men, but whose true abilities fall far short. The Bible is very insistent on this point. Remember that David, the Bethlehemite is to become the legendary ancestor of Jesus, God's very self. David becomes a king himself eventually, and the mistakes of his kingship are even bigger and more violent than Saul's. David must mourn his own sons, not one but two of whom are killed as a direct result of David's inability to relinquish what is not his to own or control in the first place: first Absalom, and later the firstborn child of David and Bathsheba, his stolen bride. David only survives because he comes to understand how wrong he was and he repents. We cannot escape the fact that fathers and kings

must let go in peace, it is the will and the way of God.

One is reminded of the great Stanley Kramer film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, wherein Spencer Tracy has to let go of his daughter. Tracy was himself close to death during the shooting of the film, he could only work a few hours a day. His performance with Katherine Hepburn is beyond magnificent (she was in reality the love of his life), and he died a few days after the film was completed.

There is a beautiful scene that speaks to us today in no uncertain terms. The father of Sidney Poitier's character is played by Roy Glen, who angrily tells his son to show respect by adhering to his wishes and renouncing his love for Spencer Tracy's daughter because the couple are of different ethnic origins. Glen's character is a retired mailman who has made huge sacrifices to put his son through medical school. "Do you know I carried that bag 40,000 miles for you, you owe me." His son responds, "Even if you carried it a million miles, I don't owe you. You did what you were supposed to do just as I will for my son if I ever have another one." (one has died in a crash along with Poitier's first wife). "Dad...Dad," he says, "you are my father, I am your son. I love you. I always have and I always will. But you think of yourself as a colored man; I think of myself as a man."

This is the week when fathers all around this country, and perhaps around the world, if they are paying attention to what is truly good, will hear and repeat this simple prayer: "If you would think of yourself as a man, let go in peace to love and serve the Lord."