**RCL YEAR B PENTECOST 2 June 6, 2021**

Our readings today offer a picture of people getting it wrong. And as so often is the case with scripture they hold up a mirror to us. In the First Book of Samuel, as we heard, the elders in Israel come to the prophet Samuel and ask him to appoint for them a king “like other nations.” At that time, Israel was governed by three groups: Judges; Priests; and Prophets. The judges dealt with matters of case law and resolving disputes; the priests were concerned with the religious and sacrificial life of the nation; and the prophets were the guardians of the moral and ethical wellbeing of the people. I’m simplifying, but essentially this was the system and it worked, but it wasn’t like other nations who were ruled by kings. As we heard, Samuel warned them what having a king would mean, and it may give us pause as we consider the costs of any form of government, but this was more than that. This was setting up a whole institution around which everything else was organized and to which all contributed. Not a good idea, Samuel warned. Nevertheless, like adolescent teenagers, the people (the elders in particular) would not listen.

You can read how things turned out in the subsequent chapters of the First and Second Books of Samuel and the First and Second Books of Kings. The first king was Saul, who was portrayed as being a disaster. Then came King David who is generally depicted as being the ideal of kingship in Israel. We recall the scene of Samuel having Jesse parade his sons before him, but after not recognizing any of them as a future king, asking Jesse if he had any other sons – only David, but he was only a lad, out looking after the sheep. And of course, we recall the story of David slaying Goliath. But David’s portrayal is far from unambiguous: a deeply flawed individual whose life was marred by moral failure and tragedy, notwithstanding his achievements in battle and in leading the nation. Even with the greatest of kings, kingship was problematic.

Of course, we only have the point of view of the author of the First Book of Samuel, and no doubt the political realities of the time may not have been so clear cut – especially without the benefit of hindsight – perhaps there was more merit to the idea of monarchy than is indicated by our text today. Nevertheless, the point I draw from this is that – in the author’s view at least – the people (notably the elders of the people) wanted a king *because other nations had kings*. It points to the herd-like mentality of human beings who make decisions on the basis of what others do and say. It is a way that leads to grief and sorrow, peril and disaster. It is a mentality that leads to tragedy. It is a picture of people (especially leaders) getting it wrong; and it is a mirror in which to see ourselves. What and who are the influences on our beliefs and behaviour?

Our reading from Mark’s Gospel also presents us with a picture of people getting it wrong. In those early chapters of Mark, Jesus is surrounded by crowds. Everywhere he went, Jesus drew a crowd because of the healings and deliverance from “unclean spirits,” or demons, because of signs and wonders. So many were coming they didn’t even have time to eat. People were saying Jesus had gone out of his mind – what on earth was he doing for them to say that? – even his family, his mother, his brothers and sisters, go out to *restrain* him. But before they arrive, the real nub of the problem is exposed by the religious officials, the scribes, clergy who’ve come all the way from Jerusalem to see what’s going on. Ah-ha! They say. He has Beelzebul – another name for the devil or Satan – and by the ruler of demons he has the power to cast out demons. It has a certain logic. But Jesus patiently explains that their logic is faulty: why would Satan cast out Satan? A house divided cannot stand.

But it’s not just faulty logic; it’s spiritually perilous, because although people will be forgiven their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter (God’s mercy is infinite), *whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin*. This is a riddle that has perplexed saints and sages throughout the ages. If God’s love and mercy are unlimited, how can there be an unforgiveable sin? An *eternal* sin. The only explanation I can think of is that it must be something that in and of itself precludes the possibility of forgiveness – for example, the refusal to accept forgiveness, which is a refusal to accept the God’s love. And a refusal to accept forgiveness implies a refusal even to acknowledge the need for forgiveness. Jesus sees the danger in their assuming and saying that he has “an unclean spirit,” in other words the opposite of what he is. It is the refusal to see and recognize what is good; and worse than this, it is saying that what is good is actually evil. It is not just an error, nor even a serious error (like wanting kings because others have got them), but it is a *wilful* error. It is to do with the will: seeing the good and saying that it is evil. It is a mirror. A mirror that invites us to examine ourselves to see if we can tell the difference.

As I am thinking about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the unforgiveable sin being the wilful refusal to see and recognize the good, I’m wondering if it works the other way too. The wilful refusal to see evil. Turning a blind eye to the evil in our midst. A convenience to allow our comfortable lives to go on without too much disruption.

We have all been shocked this week by the discovery of 215 indigenous children’s bodies buried at the former Kamloops residential school. It is a shocking discovery but not a surprising one; there have been many stories from survivors of such graves, and sadly, tragically, there will likely be more painful and horrifying discoveries. I don’t have adequate words to say. What I’m asking myself is, how is it that we humans get it so wrong? Over and over again. How is it that a system like the residential schools could be set up and run – by the church of all people! – with all the abuse and cruelty, all the deliberate genocide, all the separation from families, the punishments, the beatings, the deprivation, the robbing of life, all of this and more – so much that is manifestly evil, and yet people apparently just like us thought it was OK? What were they thinking? And where are we still getting it wrong today? Where are we wilfully refusing to see the good; where are we wilfully (if self-deceptively and unwittingly) embracing evil?

There was a crowd sitting around Jesus. And when Jesus was told that his mother and brothers and sisters had arrived and were outside asking for him, he looked at those sitting around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. *Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother*.” Perhaps this somehow extends to us an invitation to find a way forward; an invitation to seek God’s will, to see and to recognize the good that is among us, and to recognize evil for what it is.

*Angus Stuart*