

The Power of Truth

Most of the time, at least among human beings, truth and power don't get along very well. Truth tends to be suspicious of power, and rightly so. After all, power tends to cut corners, to take short cuts to its desired ends, and if need be, is all too often more than willing to sacrifice the truth in order to get what it wants. Which is why, as Lord Acton famously noted in the words that were printed on the front of our bulletin last week, great people—by which he meant powerful people—are seldom good people—meaning people of the truth.

But for all its might, and disdain for the mere truth, still, power tends to fear the truth, since truth is very often the only obstacle that stands in the path of power having its own way. So while most of us are usually willing, when push comes to shove, to bend the truth in order to get what we want, we'd strongly prefer that no one call attention to that fact when we do so, which is why it is often dangerous to speak the truth to those who are powerful. They don't want to hear it, and what is more, they don't want anyone else to hear it, either. So much so, that they are quite willing to use their power to silence those who stand in their way who dare to speak truth. Indeed, at times, they will even go so far as to kill the truth teller, as indeed we have seen in our gospel lesson today where we heard the gruesome story of the murder of John the Baptist.

Interestingly enough, Mark tells us that Herod himself seems to have rather liked John, at least in part, I suspect, because he did tell the truth, no doubt in refreshing contrast no doubt to everyone else around him who, seduced by the power of the throne, had long since parted company with the truth. But his wife Herodias had no such compunctions; she hated John with a passion, wanted him silenced whatever it took, and found a way to do so by forcing Herod's hand, with the result that John became another in a long line of martyrs to the truth, including numerous of the prophets before him, and many more since.

But martyrs don't go away. They have a habit of hanging around, in spirit at least, and may even continue to haunt their killers, as in fact seems to have been the case with Herod, who was convinced that Jesus was actually John come back from the dead for the express purpose of tormenting him. Killing people is just a little too crude, a little too messy. It exposes power for what it is, which is why the powerful often shy away from it, preferring to silence the speaker of truth without getting blood on their hands. So instead, if they're smart, they seek merely to discredit the truth teller by impugning their character, suggesting that their complaints are borne of personal grievances and nothing more, or failing all that, may simply put out the word that the truth teller is insane. If it's done in a reasonably sophisticated manner, it usually works, and best of all, does so without creating a martyr. That's pretty much what happened to Michal, whose sad story is the subject of our Old Testament lesson this morning from 2 *Samuel*.

Michal was one of King David's many wives whom he had married, as was the habit of kings, for purely political reasons. Michal was the daughter of King Saul, David's predecessor as King of Israel, and the sister of David's beloved friend Jonathan. But once married, Michal had served her purpose and David seems to have had very little further use for her. If she'd just kept quiet, she might have at least enjoyed a life of comfort in the royal palace, but she didn't keep quiet. She spoke up in a rather embarrassing fashion, and to silence her, David, or more likely some of the "yes-men" that tend to surround the powerful, set about to discredit her by thoroughly trashing her reputation, putting out the word, it seems, that she was a spurned and bitter wife whose complaints were no doubt motivated by personal grudges, and who was, by the way, incapable of bearing children. What had she done to deserve all that? She had simply dared to speak the truth, a most inconvenient truth, that David, for all his very real piety, was very often more about David than he was the Lord.

The occasion for her truth-telling was David's decision to bring the Ark of God into the city of Jerusalem, or as David liked to think of it, the City of David. The Ark, or as we more often know it, the Ark of the Covenant, dated back to the time of Israel's wandering in the wilderness when it was built to contain the stone tablets bearing the Law of Moses. So not surprisingly, the Ark ever since had been regarded as a very sacred object by the Israelites, the most potent symbol of the Lord's presence in their midst. Potent symbols are useful. So David planned to bring the Ark into Jerusalem, his new capital city, where he intended to make it the center piece of the new temple that he was planning to build (as we'll hear next week).

But the first attempt to bring the Ark into the city ended very badly, though we didn't read that part of the story. The Ark nearly fell off its cart, causing the death of an innocent man, a death which David—I suspect rightly—interpreted as a sign of God's anger against him, David, not the poor man who was killed. But after a while and things had calmed down, and there were no further signs of the Lord's displeasure, David tried a second time to bring the ark into the city, and this time he succeeded. That's the part of the story we did read.

It must have been quite a scene, for David made the occasion into a great religious celebration, complete with an enormous festal procession, with music and dancing and sacrifices offered every few steps along the way, and when it was all over and the Ark safely inside the city, there was a huge public feast with goodies for all. Everyone seems to have been caught up in the spirit of the day, most of all, David himself, who led the parade dancing wildly with all his might while practically naked.

Everyone, that is, except for Michal, who viewing the whole scene from her window in the palace is said to have despised David in her heart, and later upbraided him for what she termed his "shameless" behavior, seemingly disgusted with what she considered a bacchanalia more typical of the pagan Canaanites, than the more traditional religious observances of Israel, another disturbing sign of the kind of excess to which David was proving himself all too inclined. That, not surprisingly, is the last we ever hear of Michal, who at this point simply disappears from the

story, never to be heard from again, caricatured for all later generations as a bitter old woman who just couldn't stand for anyone to have a little fun. If the word had existed back then, no doubt, they'd have called her a Puritan.

But you know what? I think Michal was right. David, for all his gifts, and he had it all, was dangerously given to excess, and at some point those excesses were inevitably going to cross the line into something much worse than merely shameful behavior, behavior—as it turned out—that would prove to be terribly destructive both to David's own family and to the nation itself, as indeed we shall see in just a few weeks. How did it ever get to that point? Why didn't someone stand up and say something before things spun completely out of control?

Why? Because—one can't help but suspect—people had seen what had happened to Michal, the one person at that time who had both the guts and the opportunity to speak the truth to David, and look what happened to her. No, she wasn't killed. She was just made to look like a fool, mocked and ridiculed by almost everyone even to this very day, dismissed as a hysterical woman embittered over her family's fall from power and her own inability to bear children. Indeed, so thoroughly was poor Michal discredited that no one after her ever again dared to speak the truth to David until it was too late.

That's a problem still today. You see, becoming a martyr for the truth is one thing. I mean, there's at least some glamour to being a martyr. People remember you and many may revere your memory. You may even get a statue or a stained glass window someday. But being made to look like a fool, or what is even worse, someone to be pitied, is something else entirely, and that's what power, particularly these days, does to those who dare to speak the truth. Which is why the truth is so seldom heard, and why so many of the problems we wrestle with today just keep getting worse and worse.

It's not because the problems themselves don't admit of solutions, but because you can't solve a problem that you can't even talk about openly and honestly, and that is increasingly the case in our society and even in the church itself. Granted, no one is likely to be killed, but who wants to say anything when doing so will almost inevitably get you labeled a malcontent, or a bigot, or a fanatic, or just plain crazy? So most of us just decide to keep quiet and go about our own business. Or worse, decide we might as well go along with the whole charade and at least get our share of the fruits of power, and all the lies with which it is so comfortable.

That's what so impressive about Jesus. Jesus saw what happened to John the Baptist. He knew from that experience what happened to truth tellers, but he never stopped speaking the truth, whether to the authorities or anyone else, however little anyone may have wanted to hear it. Because it's the truth that sets us free from the lies that so often ensnare us, not power. Which is why it's Jesus we look to as our Savior.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, forever and ever...*