

PENTECOST 11 YEAR B / 12TH AUGUST 2012 / EAGLEHAWK 10 AM

The Royal Family seems very remote from us. Their life and indeed their lifestyle seem so far away from ours that we find it difficult to believe that they would know much about the normal issues of human family life. And yet... and yet. Who could doubt that the Queen would not have gone through great sadness when she saw the marriages of three of her four children fail? Who would doubt that she and Prince Philip would have exactly the same feelings towards their children and their grandchildren as the rest of us? I guess the issue is that we would never know it simply because they have been so inculcated into their public roles that they show very, very little human emotion about such things in public. Nor indeed about anything.

Do any of you remember that day when the Prime Minister of Australia wept on TV. Bob Hawke was asked a question about his daughter's drug addiction and the issue was so close to his heart that he broke down and cried. I'm sure other public figures have cried in public before, but that seemed to be the first time it had happened in front of TV cameras which beamed it all over the country and beyond. I remember the outcry from parts of the media which suggested that our Prime Minister should be above being touched by such emotions when he is in public. It would be a very interesting survey to do among us to ask those who remember that event how we felt when we saw our Prime Minister crying. It begs the question about what we think is appropriate behaviour and demeanor for those in public office. Certainly we have never seen the Queen or Prince Philip show the vaguest sign of emotion. Mind you, they do not get the grilling about personal matters that people like Prime Ministers do: such personal questions would appear to be out of court as far as royalty is concerned.

I read commentators this week on the passage from 2 Samuel who seemed to be coming from diametrically opposed points of view on the matter of David's emotional response at the death of his son Absalom. One commentator was coming from the "keep it at home" perspective with regard to public figures. Indeed, that commentator felt that the person who comes out best in this story is a bloke named Joab. This commentator suggested that Joab put the affairs of the nation above personal matters and saw David's son Absalom for who he really was: a traitor to the king. Joab's ability to deal clinically with the issues was seen as a point in his favour. In fact, in the next chapter Joab takes the king to task and berates him for being more concerned about his own grief than those who had delivered him and all his family that day.

(read 2 Samuel 19:1-8a)

(Interestingly, the framers of the lectionary left out a slab of the text of Chapter 18 which shows Joab as a particularly unemotional and even cold-blooded character. The missing section tells us that when Joab discovered that Absalom was hanging in the fork of a tree he went and thrust 3 spears into his heart just to make sure that this traitor was not going to recover.)

So, that's one side of the story: the affairs of state and how they were put into order through the agency of people like Joab.

Yet other commentators are far more in sympathy with David as a father and with his outburst of great emotion when he hears that his son has been killed. And the narrative prior to this makes it clear that Absalom was a favorite son of David's. Having favorites is not a good basis for happy families, especially when that family is as complex as this one with so many wives and step children.

Those who were here last week will remember that the passage we read from 2 Samuel was about David's dreadful lack of perspective and humanity in his dealings with Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. The story tells us that he had callously taken Bathsheba simply because he liked the look of her when he saw her bathing. And just think of what that was like for her: not much chance for her to have a say in matters. When David discovers her pregnancy he organised for Uriah to come home from the front so that David's treachery would be covered up by Uriah and Bathsheba having sex. Uriah, mindful of what his troops are going through at the front refuses and returns to the battlefield. David then gets his Generals to ensure that Uriah is killed on his return.

It is a dreadful story, even for the days in which morality may have been very different from our own.

However, through the bravery and the creative ministry of Nathan the prophet, David is made acutely aware of the dimensions of his awful act and he repents. But, as the passage suggests, certain events have been set in train by David's selfishness which will not be altered because of his repentance. The child Bathsheba is carrying dies: and David's own household becomes a dreadful mixture of intrigue and hatred between his children and even against their father.

Now of course, the Old Testament understanding of God has no problem making the connection between the two things: David's sin and the events which occur thereafter. Certainly the passage we read last week containing a prophecy of Nathan regarding the future of David's reign made that assumption. Because David sinned, A B and C will happen.

We know that certain actions are very likely to bring about a result in the future. We know that in the medical field with all the medical research that is going on: eat certain things, partake of certain habits and you are very likely to generate this or that scenario down the track. We accept that as a matter of course. What we do not accept quite so readily is that a moral action will (..or an immoral one for that matter) will bring about a definite end. The ancients operated in quite the reverse world view: that the moral choices we make always lead to certain ends, while at the same time (lacking modern medical and scientific understanding) they did not connect physical activity with other outcomes.

So the question is: do you ever connect events which occur to you and your family – and in particular, negative and difficult events – do you ever connect them with something you have done? And in particular, do you see the source of those results as the work of God? It really does get a bit messy when we begin making those connections because God seems to lack consistency. I can think of some wonderfully faithful people who have had awful tragedy and heartache with their kids. In terms of their spirituality and their faithful living their families should have turned out models of blessing to their parents. And some, who have not lived with such faith, who have not made the same sacrificial choices, have had families which have breezed through life as happy, contented and well-adjusted individuals.

So, I don't know how you were thinking when that passage was read this morning in relation to David. Were you thinking: Well, what did David expect! He brought this on himself when he sinned with Bathsheba. Yeah, yeah, I know that's what Nathan says in the narrative of last week, but as I suggested we find it increasingly difficult to be quite so neat in our categorizing of life's experience and discerning its cause.

Jeannie and I have been blessed in how our kids have turned out. They are all happily married and producing copious grandchildren – eight by Christmas - and seemingly happily balanced and sensible people. Alright, we haven't been hopeless parents but we've both known better. And some of those we would categorize as excellent parents have not been as blessed as we have let me tell you.

Having said that let me perhaps throw another perspective on what is happening in this story. When you think about the attitude that David once had towards his kingship – the way he saw it when he took Bathsheba as his by right and had her husband killed – and the way his son also made this play for power, you begin to see how they saw not just kingship but the kingdom and in particular the people in it. They really see the kingdom and the people as their playthings. Now we might think that such an issue would never touch us because we will never be in that position. Unfortunately, living in a democracy actually makes us all mini kings and queens.

If you listen to what the basic appeal of politics becomes, especially close to elections, you will know what I mean. Are politicians addressing the question in what they offer, "What is best for our nation, and what policies and programs will best address the injustice and inequity in our land"? Hardly! The policies being offered are almost always answering the question in voters' minds:

What's in it for me? As though the self-centred needs of individual voters is what drives politics and political agendas. And that agenda is little different from what we see operating in the kings of old. What's more, the same power dynamics are at play in all our communities, be they our family, workplace, or the church.

Which is a happy segue into the other passage for this morning: this reading from Ephesians.

Were any of your surprised to hear the author of Ephesians suggesting that people should give up stealing? The church has become a very middle class outfit over the years. In the early days of the church a nice neat Christian culture had not developed: it was a delightful mix of all sorts of characters.

The character of the community to which this letter is addressed can be seen in the many prohibitions our passage contains. Like the body politic, the body of Christ is at the same time a human community that threatens to divide due to attitudes and actions which belie the unity which it is meant to express. Indeed, all our communities are so threatened, including, of course, the human community. I think I told you that we were broken into a year or so back. A few things were stolen: consumer goods which affected our lifestyle very little really. But it was the sense of broken community that hurt the most: that people from my own community here in Eaglehawk should do that. It did something about how we saw people walking past for quite a while.

A scholar from a good number of years back developed a phrase to describe the world as it had become in the twentieth century. He called it a "global village". His point was that with the advent of communications becoming so efficient and immediate, our world effectively now operates something like a village did in ancient times. In olden days the limit of ones relationships was the village. The limit of our relationships is now the planet: just think of the conversations going on right at this moment by means of facebook and other media of communication. And exactly the same issues of relationship lie behind whether the world is what it was meant to be, as lie behind our congregation and whether we are what we are meant to be.

Let me remind you of some words from the Ephesians reading.
(read 4:31, 32)

The author then goes on to give the basis for taking this attitude to sustaining community.
(read 5:1,2)

Kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness: you don't see much of that in the political arena with regard to those of a different persuasion. Would that not be seen as weakness in most political contexts? But to do those things, to offer those attitudes towards others is to imitate God: that is what God is like: kind, tenderhearted, forgiving.

Friends, let me say this to close: the tone of a congregation is a clear reflection of the nature of the God that is worshipped therein. I know some have found it difficult when I have asked you to think about different concepts of God from the judgemental picture that we find in certain parts of the bible: the angry God who would demand the death of a human being to assuage that anger. Judgementalism and legalism flow from that notion of God and that will mean that there will be judgements constantly being made about each other. The end result of which is often congregations splitting apart. The simple message from the author of Ephesians is that we be like God: the God that we have come to know in Jesus and our community of faith will reflect the beauty of God's nature.