

Sermon at Eaglehawk Uniting Church

Rev Ralph Clarke

16-6-13

Readings: 1 Kings 21:1-21,27-29; Luke 7:36-50

These readings are stories about leaders who think of ordinary people as fairly unimportant. A king thinks that because he is king, he can have his neighbours vineyard no matter what that means to his neighbour, & a Pharisee denigrates a woman because of her reputation as a sinner.

You might find yourself thinking about similar situations to these stories. The king & his wife will do anything to get what he wants. The vineyard could just as easily have been oil in East Timor, or the votes needed to win an election. The king might be a government or council acquiring your land for minimal compensation, or mining companies wanting privileged access to minerals. It's a bit like taking land from aboriginals after 1788 - Terra Nullius – as if the land belonged to no-one, or robbers being prepared to kill people to get what they want. Ahab & Jezebel require others to do their killing, & then try to act as if they had nothing to do with it. Sounds like the story of Donald Mackay's death which we re-visited this week. We might also think how we feel if someone tries to take something that belongs to us.

There are deep injustices in these stories. The victims are helpless against the power of those who want to exploit them. I am struck most of all by the way God acts in these biblical stories. As soon as Ahab takes possession of the vineyard after Naboth's death, God has Elijah sidle up to Ahab & say that no matter what spin the king or his media puts on the whole thing, what he has done is murder & theft in God's eyes. Ahab might tell himself that what he has done is ok, but Elijah reminds him that he still has to deal with God's judgement & punishment. And, no matter how unimportant Naboth seemed to the king, or the woman to the Pharisee, leaders have to appreciate the lowly ones because these are important to God. Economics & politics are not above God's love & justice even if that is sometimes how it seems in our world.

In the Old Testament story a severe judgement is pronounced by God. Because of what Ahab & Jezebel did they will die a horrible death & their people will also suffer. Wow! Just think of that. Residents of a country will suffer because of the action of their leader, even if the residents had nothing to do with what the leader did.

Then Ahab becomes very repentant. He did everything possible to humble himself. And God accepted his repentance & freed Ahab of his punishment. Sorry obviously means a lot to God. That's also why the woman in Luke's story is accepted. The Pharisee tries to focus on what she has done in the past, but Jesus remembers her willingness to begin a new life, & that means more. God looks to the present & future & not only the past. The repentance of these two is a model for us.

The end of the story in 1 Kings 21 still leaves me feeling a bit uncomfortable. The king gets forgiven but the people of Ahab's kingdom still have to wear the punishment for what the king & his wife have done. How unfair is that? Is that how God treats us? Are we to be responsible for the actions of our leaders?

Perhaps this is not only about God's punishment but a reminder that even small actions can have larger consequences. It reminds us that the effects of our actions are not always wiped out by forgiveness, even God's forgiveness. Future generations often carry the taint of past smells. We see it in our world. Our energy use has long term effects on the environment & future generations suffer. The way we treat people can sometimes destroy their confidence for a lifetime. We may not see the effects, but the victim & their family has to pick up the pieces. In the trial of Jill Maher's killer this week Jill's family was allowed to make statements indicating how the crime had affected them. The search for Donald Mackay's body also re-opened old sores for his family & the community of Griffith. There are always consequences.

The story of Ahab points to the need for some long term community responsibility for the actions of its citizens. Most of all, I think this story points to the huge gap between the effects of human sin and God's forgiveness. Perhaps we are right to feel the injustice of the king getting let off, & future generations having to live with the consequences of other people's crimes. Maybe the gap between forgiveness, & the effects of sin, is to help us appreciate the incredibly huge bridge of forgiveness that God has built to cross that gap. As

Luke reminds us, forgiveness is more important than the Pharisee understands, but the sinner woman who receives forgiveness understands it very well, & offers all she has in gratitude.

What if these stories are meant to remind us of the extraordinary gift of forgiveness that God has given so we can accept that forgiveness ourselves. What if it is meant for those who take forgiveness for granted & who act as if forgiveness is only a small thing? We can appreciate how enormous God's forgiveness is when we look at the longer term consequences of our actions & see how much is forgiven. Perhaps then we can also begin to live in ways that enhance the world rather than destroy it.