

2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12b-19 (Psalm 24); Ephesians 1: 3-14; Mark 6: 14-29

Today we have two pretty challenging stories of biblical royalty, one incredibly gruesome one of Herod beheading John the Baptist, and one slightly less gruesome but still sad one about King David. Two different stories of royalty, neither of which really has a fairy-tale ending. In many ways, both deal with the extremes of entitlement. Taken too far, entitlement can be really harmful, especially if your name happens to be John the Baptist... but in our world, too, we see the abuses and misuses of entitlement, especially in the land of the rich and famous.

The first story is of King David, who is dancing and rejoicing. He has recently been crowned king, after the death of Saul, and is celebrating that (among other things). He dances for joy, and praises God, and celebrates the ark of the Covenant – the place where the Ten Commandments are kept – and even has a feast. But did you notice the line about Michal? That she “despised him in heart”? You might be wondering who this Michal is, and what caused her to hate David so much. Well, that’s David’s wife, and although we don’t hear a lot about their story together in our regular Sunday readings, Michal has a pretty interesting and dramatic story. I’ll try and sum it up in a nutshell, though it almost would be eventful enough to pass for a novel or movie or something these days. Saul, the king before David, promised the hand of his first daughter in marriage to whoever would kill Goliath. And, as many of you might know, and we heard this story in our readings just a few weeks ago, the person who killed Goliath, the giant, was little, unassuming David, still a young boy when he accomplished this feat. Now, Saul was jealous enough of David that he changed his mind and married that first daughter off to someone else instead. And this is where Michal came in. She’s the second daughter of Saul, and he said that if David killed 100 Philistines, he could marry Michal, and therefore marry into the royal family. A little unfair on Saul’s part, since he had already struck a deal with David about killing Goliath, but there we are. And this actually works out pretty well for Michal, because we’re told she loved David. So, David goes off and kills not only 100 but 200 Philistines. Saul’s still not pleased with this, so he sends soldiers to kill David. Michal helps David escape, and Saul is annoyed enough that he marries her off to someone else instead. While David’s on the run, he takes a few more wives. And then he comes back to get Michal. And while we hear that Michal loved David, but we never hear that David loved Michal. Maybe it was love that brought him back, and this is a story of romance. Or, maybe it was just “claiming what was rightfully his”, after all that Saul had put him through.

Now, we don’t hear exactly when Michal stopped loving David. Maybe it was their time apart. Maybe it was when he took her back from someone she had already

married. Maybe it was when she met his other wives. We don't really know. But what we do hear is what we heard in today's reading, that when she saw him "dancing before the LORD with all his might" she "despised him in her heart". No real "happily-ever-after" here.

And then we have the pretty gruesome story of King Herod beheading John the Baptizer, which always sticks out in my memory, even if it only comes around once every 3 years, because it's just so dark! It speaks of barbaric actions, of beheading someone because of what they had said or done. And for a young girl to ask for that as a reward? Sounds like something we'd expect to see on Game of Thrones or something.

The problem is that Herod didn't want to kill John the Baptist. Although he didn't like what John the Baptist had to say about his wife – because John the Baptist spoke the truth to him, saying that he and his wife shouldn't actually be married – Herod put him in prison, but wasn't ready to kill him. He was actually a bit afraid of him, because he knew that John was a good man, so he protected him, and even listened to him. Unfortunately, Herod's wife Herodias wasn't a fan of John the Baptist, and she plotted to get rid of him. When her daughter, Salome, danced at Herod's birthday, he was so impressed that he promised her anything she asked for. Big mistake. She talks to her mom, who suggests that she ask for the head of John the Baptizer on a platter.

Everything we do is a choice, and every choice we make has consequences. Some choices are easier to make, "no brainers", and have very little impact on our lives. Cereal or toast for breakfast? Watching this show or that show? Taking the scenic route or the highway? But each choice we make impacts the outcome of our lives, and changes things in minor ways. And other choices have much more dramatic results. Herodias made a pretty alarming choice when she chose to use her daughter for her own gain, to get the horrific thing she wants most of all. Not a great royal example.

Herod, wanting to be a man of his word, and possibly letting his pride get in the way, does what he promised, and gives the girl what she asked for, on a platter. I can't help but think that this is where the saying "having things given to you on a silver platter" comes from. I'm sure it's not, but now I can't get that image out of my head.

So where is the mercy in this story? Although Herod made this promise, and wanted to stick to his word, he didn't have to kill John the Baptist. He could have said no, if he had wanted to, because he had both the power to kill and to let live. But he didn't want to show that weakness. So he went along with it, and we're

even told he “was deeply grieved.” What an example he could have set, if he had chosen to spare him! But instead he lets his ego get in the way and doesn’t want to embarrass himself in front of his guests. How many times have we gone along with something in our lives, because we didn’t want to go against the grain?

We may have a hard time imagining a story exactly like this in our world or our lives, but we’re not immune to the powers and corruptions in this world. We don’t have to do much more than open the newspaper and see abuses of power, lack of mercy, and tonnes of corruption, even in our own backyard. It may not be as obvious as someone physically beheading another person, but there’s plenty of times when people are cut off from a number of things, or when pride is more important than mercy, or when people act blatantly hateful, or when we ignore our more compassionate instincts, and those cases are definitely upsetting to see.

Thankfully, although these are biblical examples, they’re still examples of earthly royalty. They’re not examples to live our lives by, more like what not to do, but thankfully they’re also not the only examples we have. We have Christ, the King of Kings, in whose footsteps we try to follow, footsteps of love, compassion, and forgiveness. Through our baptism we’re adopted into God’s family – which is the ultimate royal family – as God’s children, becoming royalty in the heavenly kingdom. And Jesus certainly has banquets and feasts, with much happier results than Herod’s. At Jesus’ table, we’re all welcomed, encouraged, and brought to the table. It will be full of mercy and forgiveness, the total opposite of what we see in today’s stories. There will be dancing and singing and love and joy, and it will exceed anything we can imagine. Our fairy-tale, happily-ever-after awaits in the world to come.

Amen.