

## **Pentecost IX: Bathsheba's story**

**2 Samuel 11: 1-15** Ps 14 Eph 3: 14-21 John 6: 1-21

*How do preachers in traditions that use a set lectionary decide what text to talk about, and then, what to actually say?*

I have been asked that question in previous congregations, but not yet at All Souls, so I am taking this opportunity to tell you anyway...

At the start of a new lectionary cycle, early in the week, I read the lessons for the next Sunday and pray: "OK, God what do you want to say next Sunday?" Then it is a process of reflection, study and "percolation" in the week that follows.

Based on what strikes me, I read commentaries and other reflections on the text/theme/topic that seems to emerge. I make a point of trying to read a balance of opinions and interpretations. Sometimes, the direction of a sermon changes as the week progresses, so it ends up different from what I expected or planned.

The Gospel lesson set for **Pentecost IX** in Year B tells two well-known stories from Jesus' ministry, from John's Gospel, even though Year B has a focus on Mark. These are the feeding of 5 000 people and Jesus' walking on the Sea of Galilee/Tiberias during the night when the disciples are in a boat battling rough seas.

These stories are rich seams to mine and lend themselves to all kinds of interpretations and reflections, so I am sure that we have all heard numerous sermons about them.

That is why I was drawn to the Old Testament lesson because, after all, how often does a preacher get to preach on a story like Bathsheba and David! As a parishioner commented: "... the advantages of lasciviousness, adultery and murder... NOT! How did that section get into the liturgical readings?"

I confess also that knowing it is unlikely that I will be able to deliver this sermon in person emboldens me, as the text deals with some very uncomfortable topics. These topics are also current in contemporary Australia, so this seems an opportune moment.

I want to begin by quoting something I said on the fifth Sunday of Easter, when talking about the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts:

*“I have talked several times about the fact that how we read Scripture depends on who we are, where we stand in relation to the text and how we engage with it. So one African American scholar I read has a different take on this passage from that of her white, male counterparts. Similarly, as an African-born person, I am drawn to the secondary character in this story. I say the secondary character because this passage also demonstrates how Scripture itself is written from a particular perspective for a particular audience and with particular purpose.”*

The same can be said of the OT lesson set for the tenth Sunday of Pentecost. For the writer, this is David’s story. David, the “ruddy-faced youth”, the unexpected king, chosen by God over his seven older brothers, which was a story we heard on the third Sunday of Pentecost. However, the first flush of promise has dimmed over the years of David’s infidelities so that one commentator notes:

*“As I think of what happened, of this I am sure, that it did not happen all at once. This matter of Bathsheba was simply the climax of something that had been going on in his life for twenty years.” (Redpath [in Guzik])*

Another notes:

*“In the whole of the Old Testament literature there is no chapter more tragic or full of solemn and searching warning than this.” (G. Campbell Morgan [in Guzik])*

It is not as though David is starved of outlets for his libido as he has seven wives plus additional wives and concubines (Ch 5: 13). However, he sees a beautiful woman bathing and he must have her. And so unfolds the salutary story of unbridled appetites, adultery, betrayal and ultimately, murder.

Because I am a woman, I am drawn to the secondary character in the story, Bathsheba. It is significant that her name is preserved, unlike the Ethiopian Eunuch, who is not named. The way she is presented is not common in scripture as only about nine percent of the personal names in the Hebrew Bible belong to women, (slightly more than one hundred). (Wil Gafney) You can read the rest of her story in the following chapters of 2 Samuel.

Like the commentaries on the story of the eunuch, there are very different interpretations of Bathsheba's story; and again those I want to quote are from the perspective of a white, North American man and an African American woman.

According to the former, Bathsheba shares responsibility for the adultery, she is also culpable.

The text says:

*"So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her," (v. 4)*

The commentator quotes others who say:

*"... there is no intimation whatever that David brought Bathsheba into his palace through craft or violence, but rather that she came at his request without any hesitation, and offered no resistance to his desires. Consequently Bathsheba is not to be regarded as free from blame." (Keil and Delitzsch)*

*"We hear nothing of her reluctance, and there is no evidence that she was taken by force." (Clarke)*

On the other hand, for the female African American scholar it is a clear-cut case of abuse of power and non-consensual intercourse. She sees Bathsheba being taken by force as David's messengers are sent to "get her". She writes:

*"The text indicates that David raped Bathsheba — it is important to write and preach in the active voice, holding him accountable — the evidence includes David's commission of his soldiers to "take" her in v 4. Neither they nor she had the option to refuse. And only David will be held accountable by God and Nathan in 2 Samuel 12 (viz. v 9); Bathsheba will not be accused of or punished for adultery in the scriptures." (Gafney)*

She also writes:

*"...The Church has equivocated on calling David's action rape, some charging her with adultery. Having to prove to the reader that she was raped is uncomfortably similar to the plight in which many women and girls find themselves, having to prove to the police and general public that they were raped. (I say "women and girls" here, not to negate the very real experience of boys and men who also experience sexual assault, but because women and girls are so often disbelieved.)"*

These two different interpretations of Bathsheba's story illustrate how our engagement with scripture, "... *depends on who we are, where we stand in relation to the text and how we engage with it.*"

In the same way, I wonder how the text itself might be different if it had been written from Bathsheba's perspective, perhaps by a woman?

It seems particularly pertinent to reflect on Bathsheba's story in view of the latest developments around women in politics, the #March4Justice and the recent survey results showing that the level of violence in relationships is higher in the Anglican community than in the general population.

I am pleased to report that the *10 Commitments for Preventing and Responding to Domestic and Family Violence* that emerge from this report will be recommended for adoption and implementation at the forthcoming diocesan Synod in September. I attach them for your information.

#### **References**

enduringword.com: David Guzik

Workingpreacher.org: Richard Nysse

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*Eating with the Bridegroom*, John Shea, 2005, Liturgical Press

*Sunday and Holy Day Liturgies, Cycle B*, Flor McCarthy SDB, 1984, Dominican Publications