

Sunday 7

Even those of us who feel somewhat unfamiliar with the Old Testament are familiar with the names Saul and David. We know that both were kings of Israel, Saul first and then David, and that Saul as king became jealous of David because the people were praising David, a shepherd boy who had killed the giant Goliath with a stone from his sling shot, more than they were praising Saul. Therefore Saul sought to kill David in order to remove a challenger to his throne.

In our first reading today from the First Book of Samuel Saul, with his army, is searching for David to kill him. It is night and Saul and his army are sleeping. David, with his assistant Abishai, succeeds in slipping into Saul's camp and finds Saul asleep. Abishai says to David: "Let me nail him to the ground with one thrust of the spear." But David refuses to let him do so, even though it would have meant the end of all his troubles. He says to Abishai: "Do not harm him, for who can lay his hands on the Lord's anointed and remain unpunished?" Instead he and Abishai take Saul's spear and water jug, leave the camp and then when they are far enough away to be safe, David calls out: "Here is the king's spear. Let an attendant come over to get it." Then he addresses Saul directly:

“Although the Lord delivered you into my hands today, I could not lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed.”

In the same book, two chapters earlier (ch. 24), there is a similar incident. Again Saul is seeking to kill David. At one point Saul seeks out a cave in order to attend to the needs of nature.

Unknowingly he has chosen a cave in which David and his men are hidden. Again David has the chance to kill Saul, and his men urge him to do so. But he doesn’t. He moves close enough to David to cut a piece off his robe. After Saul leaves the cave, David steps out and calls to him: “Look here, my Father. See the end of your robe which I hold. I cut off an end of your robe and did not kill you. Now see and be convinced that I plan no harm and no rebellion.”

In both cases David models a way of living that goes beyond revenge. However, the reason David gives for his way of life is the holiness of the king as the Lord’s anointed. He will not harm Saul because he is the Lord’s anointed. But in today’s Gospel the Lord Jesus takes this way of living and extends it to every person, for every person is sacred, is God’s anointed, for every person is made in the image and likeness of God.

Not too long ago we heard of the death of Whitey Bulger in prison. Bulger had been a criminal on the run for years. He had finally been found and sentenced to life in prison for his many criminal acts, including the murder of people. He had just been transferred to a different prison, perhaps for safety reasons, but there he was murdered by his fellow prisoners within hours of his arrival. The public reaction to his death was clear. People felt that he finally got what he deserved. Indeed one person interviewed expressed his hope that Bulger's death had been slow and painful.

Such a reaction is understandable. People had suffered. They had lost loved ones at Bulger's hands. Therefore, they wanted him who had caused their suffering to suffer himself. Only then would they feel that justice was served. Only then were the scales be again in balance. But David in the OT and the Lord Jesus in today's Gospel and its parallel passage in Matthew urge us to move beyond this "tit-for tat" way of living into a larger schema, one built on the way God himself acts with us, "for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:45).

Normally we treat others the way they treat us. If they are unfriendly, we are unfriendly. If they are kind, we are kind. That seems to make sense. And that seems to be the basis of society living as well. Those who harm others are punished; those who are good to others are rewarded or at least respected by others. But today's teaching by the Lord contradicts our ordinary way of dealing with people. According to the Lord's teaching we are not to respond in kind to those who treat us badly. Rather, we are to treat them as we treat those who love us. That is, we are to treat those who are acting like enemies as if they were acting like friends. We are, as Jesus says, to love them. This is a way of life which strains the ordinary human rules. This is to think divine thoughts, not human thoughts. This is to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Even after two thousand years of Gospel teaching, such a way of living seems to go untried by many, if not most, of us. It is not yet Lent, but maybe it would be good for us to begin early this year by asking ourselves: "What grudges do I still hold? What "enemy" have I yet to forgive? When do I give as good as I get in an exchange of nasty words and actions? Is the so-called litigiousness of our present society reflective of the Gospel message? Has it invaded my life? If so, we have to move above and beyond it into

the sunlight of the Lord Jesus and his Father who makes his sun and rain to fall upon the good and bad without distinction. We must be perfect, perfectly merciful, as the Father is, and as the Lord was in his living and dying.