

King Dancing

Sunday 15th July 2018, All Saints Kings Heath

The Revd Canon David Warbrick

2 Samuel 6:1-5; 12b-19

Mark 6:14-29

If there's one thing worse than Dad dancing, surely it's King Dancing. David dances with all his might, enthused, fuelled and inspired by what's in that box: the Law, through which he knows Israel will find health and peace; The Law which, if we may summarise, melts away independence and individualism, accentuating and celebrating our interdependence, male and female, rich and poor, young and old, citizen and foreign traveller.

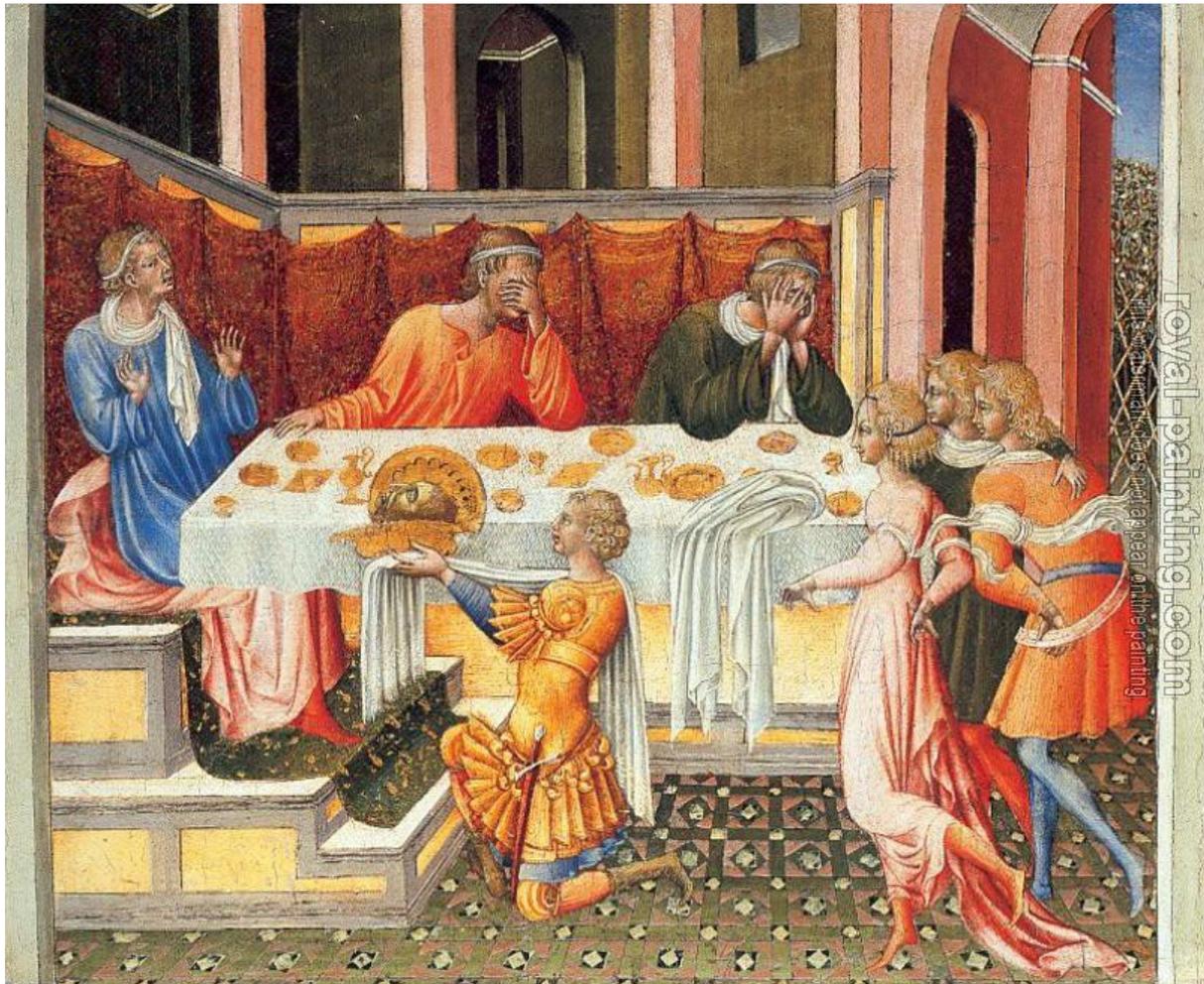
Law which celebrates the dignity and creativity of work, while weaving sabbath throughout so that humanity remembers our mortality and treats all creation as a gift and so never abuses it.

Law which holds God's attention to us at the centre of our attention in such a way that no thing, no one, no principle can disport perspective by becoming an idol.

This law has been lost and found, forgotten, stolen and now recovered. David dances because Israel has got its heart back. His reputation will be made of passion about that Law, not dignity, pomp or ceremony. David is despised by his predecessor's daughter. Saul's old school kingship went sour as his reputation became an idol, so he became more and more jealous and so clutching power and dignity, they bled through his fingers. The climax of the dance which held God at its centre was a feast, not just for the king and his court, but for everyone: a wholesome meal of meat, bread, fruit. For this God, made known in this law, connects everyone.

Herod does not dance, but orders his step daughter to dance instead. Lust may feel exciting, but its out of control twisted desire is actually to despise the girl. He wants to swell his reputation before these would-be powerful men at his table, courtiers, military leaders and senior community figures. As she dances, they think their power is growing like the swelling between their legs, but it is being drained out of them, especially Herod, and when the bluff is called on his ridiculous promise, so lavish it can only be redirected lust for his step daughter, he suddenly feels his powerlessness. He is fascinated by John and listens to him and knows he is good. He is distressed, but in his lust for reputation and lust for a girl he becomes one of the most pathetic, powerless figures in Mark, maybe in the whole Bible.

Three skilled expositors, whom I met on Sabbatical a year ago, help us today. Di Paolo highlights Herod's moral powerlessness by showing his horror at the sight of his own order fulfilled. His reputation being further dissolved is shown by the guests' locked fingers and their leaning away from him. There is real pathos, which is in Mark's text, showing a subtlety and emotional intelligence in his reading of the elite on whom he is generally so hard.



Di Paolo, National Gallery, London, 1454

Then Caravaggio makes sure we consider the abusive nature of the parent/child/stepparent/male/female relationships, imagining such sad horror in the girl's eyes. her pale skin will soon line in such a poisonous environment. We look at her mother's wizened face. By showing Herodias has having lost her beauty, her power as a woman diminishing with it, using her daughter's beauty, Caravaggio expounds the gender and age politics of the story. In her jealousy she loses her daughter's love and respect in a horrific contrast to the inter-generational inter-dependent culture of the Law in David's box. Looking at John's head, Herodias is looking at her own death. (We also note, John's mouth is open as if still speaking. The tight lips of the other three figures remind us only John, even in death, has anything life giving to say. Yes, Herod knew he was worth listening to.)



Caravaggio, National Gallery, London 1607-10

Giotto highlights the brutality of the death at the feast by evoking the scene in delicate colours, the effete musician's pose so gentle compared to the deathly order. Ordinary people like you and me, how culpable are the minstrel and servants acquiescing in the sexual abuse of the dance? We feel the watching guests' and Herod's culpability with a shudder as we notice the huge black knife meant for cutting the meat of their sumptuous feast. The human flesh cut by the soldier melds with that on the table.

Giotto shows another scene, the girl kneeling in obeisance, giving her mother John's head, a parody of all the figures kneeling before the Madonna on the walls around, Giotto makes sure we think about how much we ask of our children, and what we will do to secure a parent's approval.



Giotto, Santa Croce, Florence, 1313

But what if, in order to survive the poisonous abusive environment, Herodias' daughter embraced it, used it, worked the energy of others' jealousy, prodded and provoked it in order to study and master it? We can't be sure, but Mark shows, when her mother made the ghastly jealous request, the girl added the grotesque detail of the platter. Four times, he says she hurried. Di Paolo makes sure we think about that showing her gleeful fascination, leaning forward slightly, foot light and playful still, her discarded white stole connecting with that of the soldier holding John's head and the scarf about Herod's neck.

These different expositors do not contradict, but reveal different aspects of the politics, possibilities, risks, lessons and delusions of the event.

The meal in front of Herod's guests now revolts. Di Paolo connects the floating delicate gold vessels and chalices for their dinner with the shimmering gold of the soldier's armour. With the highest irony, he looks more like an angel than a soldier as he bears the gold haloed head of John and kneels before the fake king.

How far we are from the young King unconcerned about reputation, knowing all he needed is found in the character of God. How far from his wholesome feast for all the people, connecting everyone, not excluding or manipulating. David's feast foreshadows this Eucharistic one in which we are partaking. In a macabre way so does John's head on a gold plate which reveals Herod's feast to be revolting and makes his manipulative food offering inedible.

If only Herod knew what was in that box. He was so close, listening to John. A life of grasping status, of jealousy of others, is disconnecting. It spirals into a paranoid life of neurotic self-justification. Using others for our aggrandisement makes us look ridiculous and leaves us terribly lonely.

A sabbath free existence is not only a life that runs away from death only to find itself crashing into it; it is also a life without thanksgiving and treasuring; forgetting everything is gift, it becomes more and more abusive of people and creation alike.

A life idolising the self, or titles or power or lust is a life lost and deathly and, sure, a life that can have deadly consequences for others, too.

It is easy to keep King David and King Herod at a distance because we're not royalty, we're not very likely to have anyone executed. The tragic and pathetic Trump/May/Johnson dance is easy to hold in contempt, but should not distract us from our own self-defeating pitches for status, our idolising of independence, our desperate appeals for attention, our futile attempts at reputational management through social media and the ways our healthy human desires are distorted into lust. These Biblical characters beg us to open up about the jealousies between generations and genders and our acquiescence in a political discourse that accentuates individualism over connectivity. These brilliant expositors of this brilliant Gospel text help us to experience the spectrum of behaviour in which we are all embroiled.

Herod's feast is a million miles from David's and even further, in the other direction, from this healthiest of feasts in which, with ironic talk of the body and blood of Christ, held in silver chalices so lovingly cared for by Bernice, we gently restore our union with the one who embodied what the law traced: mutuality in love, God centred wisdom and sabbath thankfulness. Rather like the gold halo and the gold clad angel soldier, our communion beautifies, beatifies, the ugliest thing humanity has ever done and reverses the horror of Herod's feast. In a flake of bread we are rescued from all the ugly parodies in our lives. That would be worth dancing about, but if there's one thing worse than King Dancing, it's Vicar dancing, so instead I will lift the wafer up on your behalf with all my might.