

St Bene's Sermon 13/6/10 HC Philip Jenson

**Text: 1Ki 21:1-22; Gal 2:15-21; Luke 7:36
- 8:3**

Introduction

In the books of Samuel and Kings there are two master narratives that sum up the misuse of power and its terrible consequences. They tell of the clash between two central concerns then and now - kingship, and the law. How to rule, and how to live.

The first is the story of David and Bathsheba - and we hardly need reminding of the significance of sex. But the second story, part of which we heard earlier, concerns another theme - land. The story of Naboth's vineyard. It's a central theme in the Old Testament, but neglected, by and large, in our culture. But land remains a crucial issue and is at the heart of much of the large-scale violence we see today. Who owns this parcel of land or that, and what can be done with or on or under or to the land.

Land, for instance, lies behind many of the grievances of Africa. At present our attention is on South Africa, whose land was largely seized by the whites through conquest. For example, in 1969 in the expansion of the Kruger national park, the Makuleke community was removed forcibly from its ancestral lands in the Pafuri area. The story of recent European history is in good measure the story of colonial rule - often through the cynical exploitation of law.

As Christians we tend to concentrate on personal or individual ethics. Passages like 1 Kings 21 are uncomfortable because they address the big social and political questions. But precisely because of that they may be all the more important in resisting the privatisation and marginalization of our faith by those who would prefer not to consider these matters.

Scene 1

So let us turn to our passage in more detail.

The introduction sets before us two of the main characters.

First up is Naboth. Respected, land-owner, man of faith. An Israelite with a vineyard - a limited but attainable ideal. Selling his vineyard was not illegal, but Naboth prized the traditional idea

that the land was a gift from the Lord to his people, to be prized and preserved.

In the other corner we have Ahab - the king. An Israelite king, with an awareness of those traditions that Naboth prized. But a king who has married a foreign princess, Jezebel, not so attached to Israel's traditional God and ethos, but instead attracted to a very different idea of land and kingship. He has a summer palace in Jezreel for which he has grander designs. What better, indeed, than a vegetable garden. Actually, I like an alternative suggestion that it's simply a 'garden of greens' - a pleasure garden of shrubs and flowers. A luxury rather than a necessity, as a vineyard was in the traditional Israelite economy.

The contest is begun by Ahab looking over his fence, and rather fancying Naboth's nice little vineyard. Which he offers to buy, or replace with an equally good vineyard. Which is perfectly in accord with the modern logic of the market: all can, indeed, must - be bought and sold, for this is what makes the world go round for those in the business.

But astonishingly Naboth refuses - and embarrassingly reinforces his decision with an oath 'The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.' Ahab is stymied. He goes home sullen and resentful, even bitter and angry. He is caught between what he knows is right, and what he wants, between temptation, and the fulfilment of that temptation. I suspect that most of us know that kind of unhappiness as we look across our own fences to what others have and enjoy. So Ahab retires to bed, turns his face to the wall, and sulks.

Scene 2

That may have been that in other circumstances. But Ahab has a wife, and Jezebel has other ideas when she hears about Naboth. Her rebuke to Ahab is savage and satirical - you (there's an emphatic opening pronoun ignored by the NRSV) - you! is this now how you act as king over Israel?! Not for Jezebel the vacillation, the uncertainty of Ahab, who is grateful to hand over to her solve the problem and not enquire too closely. For Jezebel, kings rule over, not under or through. There are no limits to what they may or may not do. Kings take. They do not need to follow the laws that others abide by.

Scene 3

And so letters are written, elders suborned, scoundrels found - these two 'witnesses' are called literally sons of Belial - sons of worthlessness, or good-for-nothings; in later tradition, sons of Satan. A fast is proclaimed, probably to give cause for a hasty kangaroo trial. The result is a travesty of what the law was meant to do: protect the weak against the powerful. And so Naboth is stoned and dies. Jezebel triumphantly informs Ahab about the success of her machinations, and Ahab sets off to take possession of his new garden of greens.

Scene 4

Except he never gets there - for Israel has prophets, who call kings to account. Elijah meets him and announces God's judgement. 'Because you have sold yourself (a fittingly commercial idiom) - because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring evil (that is, disaster) on you. Because Ahab has not guarded justice in Israel, as a king should, the Lord, Israel's true king, will step in. History not the law court will provide the arena for justice - and for the punishment that fits the crimes of Ahab and Jezebel.

Reflections

Stepping back, what might we learn from this potent narrative?

1. The temptation of the adjacent

While we may not be in the habit of desiring vineyards, we all face what one commentator has called the temptation of the adjacent. It is the focus of the tenth commandment, the commandment that addresses the hidden thoughts and intentions of our hearts. "You shall not covet" - and then a non-exhaustive list of possibilities. Coveting is, I think, the primary temptation of our affluent society, itself a child of a colonial culture that coveted the lands and wealth of other nations.

Our text this morning alerts us to the tension between Ahab and Naboth: the way of coveting and the way of contentment. One feature of Jesus' redefinition of kingship is how he becomes a king who refused to take and dispossess, who lived rather to serve and to give. In Christ we discover the possibilities of living without coveting the adjacent.

2. The escalation of sin

This story is a warning of the terrible consequences of how our sinful nature can seize on

temptation and turn it into something incomparably worse. Ahab's temptation begins with the tenth commandment and inexorably works round many of the others: do not covet becomes do not bear false witness, do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, do not murder, do not steal. Yes, it is others who break the commandments, but ultimately Ahab is responsible. Indeed, sin is never limited to the individual. When kings are involved, it merely makes the point clearer.

Fortunately the reverse is also possible: repentance and freely accepted suffering can reverse the terrible results of sin. This again we see in the way of Jesus, which profoundly influenced the astonishing Truth and reconciliation process that has done so much in overcoming South Africa's colonial past. We choose: to be tempted, or to overcome temptation with the help of Christ.

3. The law of God

Our story shows how sin and evil can corrupt the law of God, which is meant to protect the weak and limit the actions of the powerful. Paul in our Galatians reading addressed another kind of abuse of the law. In recent years I have become more and more concerned about how the law in itself is regarded negatively. In our culture it is often regarded as a barrier to freedom. In the church it can be seen as inferior to the gospel, or as a temporary feature of the Old Testament.

Nothing could be further from the true and proper purpose of the law, which is to guide how we are to live well now that we have received the gospel. It is, indeed, nothing other than the law of love - worked out in the personal, social and political spheres.

Conclusion

The Makuleke land claim was lodged in terms of the Restitution of Land Rights Act in December 1995. The eventual transfer of the restored land took place in 1999, 30 years after the Makuleke community had been dispossessed. For those who seek the Lord, the law can and must become the law of justice and freedom and love.