

During the week for the first time in several years I sat down at a piano to play. As I looked at the notes on the page before me, I wondered if I would be able to remember what any of them meant, and where my fingers should go. I was surprised then that while I was trying to work it out in my brain- my fingers seemed to almost move of their own accord and found notes and chords that reflected what was on the page before me. The keys felt familiar to my fingers, almost like an old friend.

I had forgotten how much I used to love playing – which was how I was taught – to enjoy the process of making music. I was surprised at how comfortable it felt until I realised that I would need to practice a lot to enjoy it more again.

While I made lots of mistakes as I played, it was reassuring to be playing songs that were familiar and sounds that were resonate to memories of from long ago – when I lived with a piano in my bedroom.

So often we return to practices or people or even experiences which are surprisingly

reassuring and in those moments, we get a glimpse of our past, as well as the people we have become; and maybe even a little of what the future might hold.

The reading we hear from Ephesians today is one that will be very familiar to many and often reads like one long sentence of reassurance that God loves them. But it is not just any love – and love as of one who is chosen. It is like the author cannot tell the reader enough how much they are loved.

This passage is also a celebration of God, and all that has been created¹. We are not an accident, rather we are part of the amazing patchwork of creation which God has made.

These opening verses in the letter to the Ephesians are comforting and hopefully reassuring of all that is possible, and all that has potential. Like returning to something we enjoy.

It seems strange then that such words of comfort and reassurance are paired in the lectionary with Mark 6, and the

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-2/commentary-on-ephesians-13-14-13>

uncomfortable recount of the beheading of John the Baptist.

There is an element that these two passages give us a glimpse of both the best and the worst of humanity. The song of love in Ephesians which celebrates the hope of creation. And then the song expressed as power and influence in the story of John's beheading. Our God is strong and powerful, but God has also given us free will and choice, and power of our own, which means at times our choices, or the choices of those around us, cause unthinkable things to happen.

John the Baptist is not just the forerunner to Jesus, he is a prophet and political advocate in his own right. John is using his power not only to introduce the concept of Jesus and a new view of God, but like Jesus he is addressing the political and social issues of his day – the misuse of power by the occupying Roman armies, and the misuse of power of the temple leaders. Both John and Jesus hold up an alternative view of power, a power which is not based on control but on love and relationship. Karoline Lewis suggest

that God's power has as its end the hope of approach, the hope of relationship –(as we hear described in Ephesians). God's power is outside of itself and not turned inward. God's power is for the sake of love.²

It was this concept of power which brings hope that the Roman and temple leaders fear. It is very hard to control a community that has hope that things might change – it is not as compliant. Also it is very hard to retain the support of others in power if you are advocating that this power might be used in a more just way.

Herod, and Herodius did not like what John had been saying – they felt confronted by his statements. John was not afraid of them and for this he was imprisoned. Mark tells the story of John's death at this point in the narrative because he trying to help his audience understand the similarities between John and Jesus – and the growing fear that Jesus was 'John raised from the dead'. Jesus behaviour was also confronted and intended to confront the way that the authorities were using their power. Mark places this recount

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3653>

of John's death after sending out the twelve disciples probably for two reasons. Firstly, he is signalling the kind of political death that Jesus is also likely to face (and for many of his disciples). Secondly Mark makes it clear that the political context of the day, the kingdom of God and the hope of change are all related. The saying 'religion and politics don't mix' is used primarily by those in power who are confronted by the justice or love mirror which faith holds up. Herod was confronted by this mirror and so are many today. The challenge of course is for us to use our power well, in a way that brings peace and justice from a place of God's love.

Herodias and her daughter, as well as Herod and all the party guests conspired in the death of John the Baptist. They allowed their power to shape their understanding on the context, and what at first glance seems to be the manipulation of one woman, is in fact, an entire court contributing to John's death.

They did not want the status quo to change – they liked what felt familiar and reassuring and gave them power.

In some ways Herod is responding to his desire to show his love for his family; but in truth they are all disguising their misuse of power in terms of love and protection.

True love as we hear it described as expressed by God in creation in Ephesians is at the heart of all community. A love which draws belonging and inclusion, which gives voice to the voiceless, and a place to those who are unseen. The Ephesians are encouraged to build their church on these principles and values; to draw in - Everyone must feel welcomed into the church, because it is a place where God moulds, forms, and shapes us into Christ-like image.

In contrast, in the behaviour of Herod and Herodius we see the consequences of love turned to hate; and power used to control and exclude those who challenge not only the status quo; but those who hold up the mirror to the misuse of power.

I think one of the reasons these passages are paired is that it reminds us that love, at its best, brings us closer to the kingdom of God; and at its worst excludes and damages all that God has created. What is confronting in

this is that we all have the potential for either within us, and in the way that we live with each other. Both can come with returning to the familiar, without asking what draws us to that place.

As Christian community we are reminded that we have a responsibility, like the early church in Ephesus, to allow ourselves to be moulded within the creation of God's love as they saw in Christ. That means, that like John and Jesus, at times we will be called to confront those who are using power in a way that damages others and corrupts. At other times it will mean embracing with courage new ways and new opportunities.

However we relate to these passages; God invites us reflect on our own behaviour, to ensure that what we find reassuring, is not causing others to be damaged by power; but rather invites us in love as God has loved us.

Amen.