

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP:

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.

The world and those who live in it belong to God.

Who is the King of glory?

The Lord, who is strong and mighty!

So lift up your heads and your hearts!

We will lift them up in praise!

Let us worship God in beauty and holiness.

We will offer God our steadfast love and faithfulness, now and always.

HYMN: Ye gates, lift up your heads on high! #13

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Gracious God, source of life and love in all creation:

In a world marked by bitterness, you are compassion.

In a culture marked by confusion, you are the light shining in the darkness.

In a time of conspiracies and suspicion, you are the truth that sets us free.

Your stillness is peace when we are frantic.

Your strength is comfort when we are fearful.

Your wisdom is guidance when we are lost.

For all that you are and all that you give —

God, our Maker,

Christ, our Saviour,

and Spirit who lead us into life —

we offer you all honor, praise, and worship, now and always.

Father God:

You made us in your image, but often we fall short of your expectations and our own.

Forgive our preoccupation with ourselves and our lack of concern for others.

Forgive us our desire to win, regardless of the cost. Forgive us for taking the easy way when the harder road would benefit your world more. Forgive us with being comfortable with injustice that does not impact us directly. Renew us with your mercy, God, and strengthen our resolve to live and love generously, in action and in attitude. Amen.

Let us join together, praying as Jesus taught his disciples:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear the good news!

Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ — and Christ died for us; Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us.

Believe the good news of the gospel. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven and set free by God's generous grace.

CHILDREN'S TIME

HYMN: Come, let us sing to the Lord our song #412

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:

God of Word and Wisdom:

As we hear the scriptures read and interpreted today, enlighten our minds, nurture our souls, embolden our hearts, and stir our minds, so that we may live out your Word in the world you love. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **Old Testament Reading:** 2 Samuel 6.1-19 - Retrieving the Ark of the Covenant

In this reading, David, who is now king of Israel, takes the initiative to retrieve the Ark of the Covenant, and bring it to Jerusalem, his capital city. The Ark had been captured by the Philistines a generation earlier, during the childhood of Samuel, who by this time, is dead.

- **Psalm:** Psalm 24 - "The earth is the LORD's"

Psalm 24 is a psalm of praise, which speaks of God's majesty as Creator and King of the whole world.

The dialogue in the second half of the psalm suggests that it may have been written to be used in some kind of ceremonial procession into the temple in Jerusalem.

- **Letter Reading:** Ephesians 1.1-14 - A summary of the gospel

In these opening verses of this letter, Paul reviews for his readers the essential message of the gospel.

- **Gospel Reading:** Mark 6.14-29 - The execution of John the Baptist

This reading tells of how Jesus' increasing fame and popularity cause people to speculate about who he is. Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, believes Jesus to be John the Baptist, raised from the dead.

In a flashback, Mark then tells of the events leading up to John's execution.

SERMON: “Religion and Politics”

It has often been said that religion and politics are not suitable topics for polite conversation. The reason, of course, is that, in matters of religion and politics, people tend to have strongly-held views that may not be compatible with the equally strongly-held views of others. In the interest of avoiding a heated argument or debate, then, it's best to stay away from those two subjects, and find something less controversial to talk about.

However, the scripture readings for today lead us to consider both religion and politics, as well as the relationship between the two.

Perhaps many people in today's society don't see much of a connection between the two. After all, they may argue, religion has to do with faith and with a person's relationship with God, and is therefore seen as being personal and private — and, increasingly today, individual. Politics, on the other hand, has to do with how people interact with each other and how people govern themselves — and therefore belongs very much in the public arena. But, as the readings for today demonstrate, our Christian religion is very political. It has to do not only with people's relationship with God, but also with people's relationships with each other — as well as with God's authority over everyone and everything.

Today's Old Testament reading can be seen as an example of a *cooperative* relationship between religion and politics. In it, David, the new king of Israel — a politician — retrieves an important religious artifact, the Ark of the Covenant, and brings it to his newly-established capital city, Jerusalem.

The ark was a large wooden chest, overlaid with gold. It dated back to the Exodus, the time of Moses, and contained the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written. In addition, God was believed to be present with the ark; as today's reading puts it, God was believed to be *enthroned between the cherubim on the ark* (2 Samuel 6.2) — the cherubim being two carved figures on the top of the ark. The ark had been made when the people of Israel were camped at Mount Sinai, where they received the law from God; and they had brought it with them to the Promised Land. At the beginning of the First Book of Samuel, the ark was housed in a temple in a town called Shilo — in the territory that in New Testament times would be called Samaria. This is when the priest in charge of the temple was a man named Eli, the priest who served as a mentor to the young Samuel.

But then, disaster had struck. When Samuel was still a boy, the ark had been taken into battle by the Israelites, in the hope that its presence would assure a victory over the Philistines. In fact, though, the opposite had happened: the Philistines had won the battle. They had captured the ark, and taken it with them to their city of Ashdod, on the Mediterranean coast. However, mysterious things had then started happening to the Philistines, including mysterious plagues; and they had come to the conclusion that those things were retribution from the God of Israel for capturing and holding on to the ark. So, the Philistines had sent the ark back to Israel, where it wound up at a town more or less in the frontier region between Philistine territory and Israel-

ite territory. It remained there throughout the rest of Samuel's life, and throughout the entire reign of Saul, Israel's first king.

In today's reading, then, David, the new king of Israel — having recently captured the city of Jerusalem, which the Israelites had previously been unable to capture, and having made it his new capital city — decides to retrieve the Ark of the Covenant, and bring it to Jerusalem. The text doesn't explain David's reasons for wanting to do this, but it's fairly obvious that there would be political benefit to David to have the ark — the symbol of the presence of God — in his capital city, rather than in some town on Israel's fringes. Having the ark in Jerusalem would give additional legitimacy to David as king of Israel, and would help to consolidate his political power.

And so, David has the ark moved to Jerusalem, amid great fanfare and celebration. Interestingly enough, David, as king of Israel, also carries out priestly functions in this story: he wears an "ephod", which is a priestly garment; he officiates at sacrifices; and he blesses the people in God's name. In ancient Israel, apparently, there was no separation of "church" and state!

There is an element of ambiguity in the story, however, since it actually takes *two* attempts to move the ark to Jerusalem. The first attempt ends in tragedy and confusion, when the young man Uzzah dies after touching the ark.

The unfortunate death of Uzzah appears to be a warning to David that it's *God* who is actually in control of the ark. So, when David makes his second attempt to move the ark, he does so with greater reverence, offering sacrifices at the beginning and end of the journey. The attempt to move the ark to Jerusalem finally succeeds, then, and David's power and prestige as king of Israel are enhanced.

In spite of the shocking death of Uzzah, this is essentially a story in which religion and politics have a cooperative relationship. David is very aware that it is God who has chosen him to be Israel's king. Israel was — in theory, at least — a *theocracy*; that is, a society governed by God. As king of Israel, David was — in theory, at least — a human representative of God, and was himself, then, accountable to God. However, this doesn't mean, of course, that David did no wrong. As a human being, he still had his faults and weaknesses; and, in two weeks, we'll be reading the story in which David commits a major *faux pas* — or more precisely, a series of *faux pas*.

If today's Old Testament reading is an example of religion and politics in *cooperation* with each other, today's Gospel reading is an example of religion and politics in *conflict* with each other. It tells the story of how John the Baptist, a prophet, is first imprisoned, and then ultimately executed, for criticizing King Herod for marrying the wife of one of his brothers — a woman named Herodias — which was against Old Testament law.

I should point out that this is not the "Herod" who was king of Israel at the time that Jesus was born; but rather, one of his sons. Historians call him "Herod Antipas", and he ruled only a portion of his father's kingdom — the territory of Galilee, as well as a strip of land on the east

side of the Jordan River.

The way Mark tells the story, it was Herodias who had it in for John more than Herod. Herodias, says Mark, held a grudge against John, and wanted to have him put to death; while Herod respected and protected him, even though he had had him imprisoned. An opportunity to have John put to death finally presents itself, though, when Herod makes a rash promise to Herodias' daughter, to give her anything she asks for. The girl, not knowing what to ask for, asks her mother what she should request, and Herodias, not missing her chance, quickly and grimly answers, *The head of John the Baptist* (Mark 6.24). Herod, not wanting to comply with that request, but feeling he can not go back on his word, then orders John to be beheaded, and the story comes to a gruesome conclusion.

Here, then, we have a case in which a prophet — a spokesperson for God — criticizes the actions of political leaders, and suffers their wrath; in particular the wrath of Herodias. Rather than acknowledge that what John has said about their relationship was valid, they strike back at him — with unfortunate and tragic results. We can't help but see parallels between this story and the conflicts between the Old Testament prophet Elijah and the power couple of his day — King Ahab and Queen Jezebel.

How about today's reading from the Letters, then? At a first glance, it appears to be all religion and no politics, since Paul talks about God's saving work for human beings through Jesus. But two thirds of the way through the passage, we come upon these words: *[God] made known to us the mystery of his will ... to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment — to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head: Christ* (Ephesians 1.9-10). In other words, God is planning to make Jesus quite literally the Master of the Universe. If that isn't a political agenda, I don't know what is!

In fact, it's that very sentence in the reading from the Letters that describes the *proper* relationship between religion and politics. That sentence tells us that God, who created the world, claims authority over the world; and that God plans to exercise that authority fully through Jesus at some time in the future, when the time is right. Under Jesus' authority, the world will become a *true* theocracy — that is, a society governed by God — not just a theocracy in principle, as Israel was in the time of King David.

One of the responsibilities of the people of God, then, is to acknowledge God's authority over ourselves and over the world, both in word and in action. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, and say, *Thy kingdom come; thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven*, we say that we *accept* God's authority over us, and we express the desire that everyone else will do so, also.

Of course, not everyone accepts God's authority, and this is why the relationship between religion and politics is often one of conflict. This is why, in today's Gospel reading, Herod had John the Baptist locked up in prison, and why Herodias conspired to have him put to death. They didn't accept or submit to God's authority over them, and so they struck out against God's spokesman: John.

We should notice that the Gospel writer Mark tells the story of the death of John the Baptist in the middle of another story — the story of Jesus' sending out his disciples on a mission assignment. In the story immediately preceding today's reading, Jesus sends them out in pairs to teach and to heal, just as he himself has been doing; and in the verses following today's reading, the disciples return from their mission assignment, and report to Jesus on what they have done.

It looks as though Mark, in telling the story in this way, was giving the Christian church in his own day a subtle warning: that speaking a message from God can stir up considerable hostility from people who don't want to accept God's authority — especially people in positions of power and influence.

Indeed, Jesus himself also became the target of that kind of hostility, and it led to his death on the cross. Fortunately, though, Jesus' death was not the end of the story. Rather, he was raised from death, frustrating the attempts of his enemies to silence him. And, after his ascension, he entrusted his ministry to his disciples — so then, his opponents had even more people to deal with than just Jesus himself. This goes to show that God can not be stopped from carrying out his purpose in the world, no matter how strong the opposition is.

One important facet of Jesus' preaching — which had been important in John's preaching also — was calling people to repentance: calling people to change their ways; to turn their lives around; to acknowledge and submit themselves to God's authority. The call to repentance continues to be an important facet of the church's ministry today. We as members of the church need to hear the call to repentance ourselves, and we also need to pass it on to the people around us, as well as to the world at large.

The call to repentance is probably the hardest part of the Christian message for people to hear and accept. After all, people don't like being told they're doing something wrong; and they don't like being told that there's an authority higher than themselves that they're accountable to. And so the call to repentance — the call to recognize God's authority — often meets with a hostile response.

Even in today's society, people resist God's claim to supreme authority over the world and over individual lives. Indeed, in today's society there are many who don't even acknowledge the *existence* of God, let alone his authority. People want to be "in charge" in their own spheres of influence, whether it's their family, their workplace, their business, their community, or their country. People do recognize some forms of authority over themselves, such as the authority of the marketplace, or the authority of the courts, or the authority of the electorate in the democratic process, but can be as resistant as ever to God's authority.

And so, many people refuse to recognize the political dimension of the Christian religion. They accept that the Christian religion may have some benefit for people on an individual basis; they may agree that God offers people guidance and strength in times of difficulty; but they balk at the suggestion that God may have something to say about how they themselves live, or about

how society as a whole functions.

It's the responsibility of the church collectively, then, and of its members individually, to confront both ourselves and our society with the political dimension of the Christian faith. Keep in mind that "politics" in the broadest sense of the word doesn't just have to do with government, but with the way in which people interact with each other in society as a whole. As such, it embraces economics, race relations, working conditions, housing, environmental issues, and every social issue we can think of.

It's the responsibility of the church, and of individual Christians, to *name* wrongdoing and injustice in the world around us, and to critique it — as well as to acknowledge wrongdoing that we ourselves have done. If we do so, we will be following in the tradition of John the Baptist and of Jesus. And we will also face the same risks — a hostile response from those we critique.

May we as Christians, then, be faithful in our own time and place in carrying on the ministry that Jesus began — the ministry for which John the Baptist prepared the way.

HYMN: Fight the good fight #690

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

God, you are more than we can know, more than we can understand and more than we could ever ask for. Thank you for giving us the precious gifts of your Son and his Holy Spirit. Thank you for loving us through our shortcomings, and giving us new hope each day.

We thank you for all the ways in which friends, families, neighbors, and strangers reach out to others, offering support and kindness, and for those who, filled with your love, speak up to inspire us.

Hear us as we pray in silence for courageous leaders in cities, countries, and congregations, who strive to serve with integrity and honesty.

[Silence]

We pray for those who struggle to create justice where it has been compromised, and to build reconciliation among all peoples.

We remember the generations of children who lived through the residential school system and those who did not survive.

[Silence]

We remember before you quiet and reliable leaders in every walk of life who keep their word and meet their deadlines so that we can depend on them in these unsettling times.

[Silence]

We pray for committed, patient church members and community volunteers,

who work diligently toward long-term goals that will improve our world.
And we pray for the creative, impatient change makers, who keep challenging us,
to be bolder and more determined in righting wrongs, and trying new strategies.

[Silence]

We pray for the troubled in mind or spirit,
for the angry and unhappy,
and for those who feel that every day is a struggle.
Soothe their concerns, and open their hearts to claim the hope and help you offer.

[Silence]

We remember before you the sick and the dying,
as well as the bereaved who must try to put their lives back together again.
We pray for those who are trying reclaim their lives left in shreds by the pandemic —
those needing healing, a fresh start, a stable income, or those rebuilding strained relationships.
Draw close to all those who suffer,
offering your comfort and courage to face whatever comes next.

[Silence]

Abba, receive our prayers, both spoken and unspoken,
and embrace us all in your love.
Give us hearts to understand what you do for us,
and what you call *us* to do for you.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

OFFERING:

The Book of Ephesians tells us that we have received an inheritance in Christ. God's abundant gifts to us in Christ and in creation allow us to be generous in response to the needs in God's world.

What we give to God speaks to the world of God's generosity.

OFFERTORY MUSIC / ANTHEM

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

Generous God: We look around at the growth in gardens and fields this summer, and trust in the generosity you have planted within your creation.

Bless the gifts we bring, so that they too may grow in fruitfulness, and touch lives in need with your generous love; in the name of Christ, our help and our hope. Amen.

HYMN: Be thou my vision #461

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to return to your daily service for God,

seeking always to work for fairness and kindness,

and to resist wrongdoing and injustice.

And may God bless you:

May he guide and equip you to do what pleases him,

and may he fill you with his strength and peace;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.