

Trinity 10, Matins

1 Kings 11:41-12:20, Acts 14:8-20

Father Christopher

A polarised nation, its leader choosing only to listen to those who share his worldview, demeaning his office with crude language and preferring to build up his power base rather than building either for the whole nation or the long term. I speak of course of 10th Century BC Israel.

Mark Twain is supposed to have said that *'History never repeats itself, but it rhymes.'* In checking my memory online I discover that that cannot in fact be attributed to him, whereas he did write: *'History never repeats itself, but the Kaleidoscopic combinations of the pictured present often seem to be constructed out of the broken fragments of antique legends.'*

That almost suits my purposes today rather better. There is a reason why our leaders, not mentioning any former American presidents by name, continue to refract ancient myths through the prism of their own egos, and that is because human nature doesn't change. We hear of Rehoboam, Solomon's son, seeking a way forward for the kingdom which he inherited. There is a clear economic divide between Judah, the southern half of the kingdom, where Jerusalem was, and Israel, the northern portion, and Rehoboam faced a challenge as to how to keep his inheritance together. There was not just a divide between the two portions of his kingdom; there was also a divide between the opinions of his advisers, who would all probably have come from Judah. The old men, who would no doubt have served his father, tell him, *'If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day, and wilt serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be thy servants for ever.'* The young men - his mates in other words - advise him instead to say *'My little finger shall be thicker than my father's loins.'* Now, just to help you with the Authorised Version: 'loins' in Hebrew was a euphemism for phallus. I will now leave you to translate *'My little finger shall be thicker than my father's loins.'*

Perhaps there is a reason why certain American schools have removed the bible from school libraries as being too adult in its content! So this advice is not exactly intended to placate the king's northern subjects. *'And now whereas my father did lade you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke: my father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.'* And the response?

Well, to adopt another example from across the Atlantic, it was rather similar to the American response to George III's ill-fated levy on tea. *'What portion have we in David?'* they reply. And the Israelites who remained in Judah stoned the king's minister Adoram. And so Israel rebelled against the house of David, and made Joeroboam king over all Israel, i.e. the northern portion of what is now Israel, leaving Rehoboam with just Judah in the south. And so begins the schism that would last for the rest of ancient Israel's history, and the long list of the kings of each separate nation of Israel and Judah.

As with the separation between us and our American cousins, once a wedge has been driven between peoples, it is very difficult to heal. Why is it that people in power tend to overreach themselves in this way though?

Lord Acton's line about absolute power corrupting absolutely has become a cliché, because it is true. We all need to hear the opinions of those with whom we disagree.

We see the results of not doing that in Vladimir Putin, along with countless others who have been in that position. Those in power need to hear the truth behind their own publicity, ultimately in order to survive. It is normally only a matter of time before they fall once their advisers begin to feed them only flattery; at least in liberal democracies, and in other systems they are at the very least then extremely exposed.

This is not only a danger for political leaders. It is fatal for a priest to start believing the praise people often give. Don't get me wrong, it is nice when people tell you that something you have said has stayed with them, or had a significant effect on their lives. It is however important to remember that in our role we are simply facilitating the work of the Holy Spirit in helping you to come to your own realisations (which is not to undermine that work, but to put it in perspective). And, more practically, the real danger of that is that if you are puffed up by praise, you will then be downcast and depressed when people complain.

The answer to this conundrum, for anyone in any kind of authority, or indeed in any work or relationship with another person, is to develop a healthy understanding of your own worth. To be self-critical, but knowing your own strengths and value. This might all sound quite straightforward advice, and not really the proper subject of a sermon. And yet, it is in our faith I think that we find the answer.

How do we know our own value in the abstract? What is the 'gold standard' we can use when assessing where we have done well, and where we have perhaps let ourselves and others down? And in both cases to see our merits and de-merits in proportion? This is where our heart and our conscience comes into play.

The opinions of others are valuable, but they only go so far. And a valued mentor or close friend is better than a crowd; crowds are fickle and unpredictable, and public praise cannot and should not be relied on. Paul found that when one minute the people tried to make sacrifices to him and Barnabas, as Mercury and Jupiter; and the next stoned him.

Think back to the London riots in 2011. Do you remember the scene as the angry mob surrounded the car of the then Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall as they made their way to the Royal Variety Performance, and famously poked our now Queen through the broken window with a stick? I wonder whether they remembered that as they rode down the Mall for their coronation, as a different crowd cheered? Or who remembers watching the footage of the crowd in what is now Revolution Square in Bucharest in 1989 turning against Ceauşescu, as they went from cheering to jeering in a moment, prior to their execution on Christmas Day, a few days later?

Few of us probably seek self-worth in the praise of crowds - though we may in groups, and we probably know what it is to allow ourselves to become puffed up, rather than relying on a sober, prayerful assessment of the way we live our life.

And it is that sober reflection that all of these people, Rehoboam, Putin, Ceauşescu, seem to lack; but which we as people of faith should be grounded in, through prayer and our relationship with

God who is both greater than us and who made us. We saw just such a relationship with God in our late Queen of course, who set such a different example from those dictators.

It may surprise you to know that the Church of England has always practised private confession, if not compulsorily, and that I hear confessions here from time to time. But whether or not that is for you, regular examination of conscience and being rooted in God through private prayer are essential parts of the Christian life, which should be a reflective life. I know those words at the start of this service about being miserable sinners can seem rather severe, but if we know our own limitations and dependence on God, to forgive us and to sustain us, we will avoid those pitfalls and temptations which strew our way.

Knowing your own place and worth are things we spend our lifetime considering and developing, but as Christians we know at least that our 'success' in this life, whatever that is, does not depend on the acclaim of the world, but on faithful service of our God, and daily seeking to conform ourselves, in the power of the Spirit, to the life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And that might just involve a fair dose of humility. Let that be the prayer of each of us, now and always, Amen.