

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 12 JULY 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Mark 6: 14-29

"The Price of Good"

Winter Warmth Humour: Can Lawyers get to Heaven?

An engineer died and when he arrived at the pearly gates, St. Peter advised him that his name was not on the register, so he had to go to the other place "down there".

The engineer duly arrived down there and was welcomed by the keeper of the gates of hell. It was very hot, dirty and smoky, so after he settled in, the engineer arranged to meet with the keeper again and advised him he could make living conditions more pleasant for all concerned by installing some air conditioning and filtration systems to purify the air.

The keeper of hell agreed and the engineer got to work. Conditions subsequently improved to such an extent that eventually word got back to heaven.

St Peter then called the keeper and reported that there had been a clerical error and that the engineer had been inadvertently omitted from heaven's admissions register. The keeper was thus requested to send the engineer back to heaven.

The keeper refused, saying that the engineer was doing such a great job improving conditions down there, and maintaining them, that his presence was required down there permanently.

St Peter responded by threatening litigation, to which the keeper of hell laughed, and said, "Where will you find a lawyer up there?"

(Offered to us by Andrew McCallum)

The temptations of sovereignty

How obscene! A charismatic, courageous son of a priest, concerned for the common good of his ancient society, is condemned to death at a royal dinner party! In the words of Dan Clendenin,

At a dinner party one night, Herod capitulated to the sadistic demand of his girlfriend's daughter. John was a forerunner of Jesus, but he was also a forth-teller to Herod, having rebuked Herod for sleeping with his brother's wife (Mark 6:14–29). But as with many perverse politicians, Herod had his way with him who had spoken truth to power, so John was murdered.

Deceptively Simple, Deeply Subversive: John the Baptist, Politics and Religion:
<http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20090706JJ.shtml>

John's was not a moralistic rebuke. It was a concern that power is just and consistent with society's religious, cultural and political values. As Ched Myers adds, the guests at this party would have included court nobles, army officers and leading Galileans. "Mark accurately

describes the inner circle of power as an incestuous relationship involving governmental, military and commercial interests” (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 216).

John challenged this circle of power and their collusion in maintaining their own interests. He exposed their inconsistent life styles. He indicted them and invited them to change and to further the common good. He reminded them that this was God’s word to humanity. Yet the temptations of sovereignty was to seek its own power.

The *Changeling*: a parable of uncountable power

When those in power desire their own good, others pay the price. There are those leaders who will obsessively seek this power, even believing they are doing the best for society. And like all obsessions, they will be driven by its lure until citizens learn about the unjust use of power, arise and challenge it.

We encounter such obscenity in 1920s Los Angeles, in the moving Clint Eastwood film, *Changeling*. Kevin Maher of the UK *The Times*, informs us that the movie was

Meticulously researched by the former journalist J. Michael Straczynski, who lifted 90 per cent of the movie’s dialogue from court records, it tells the story of a single suburban mom called Christine Collins (Angelina Jolie) whose son Walter (Gattlin Griffith) was kidnapped from her LA home. [*The Times*, November 27, 2008]

The story revolves around how certain leaders in power, in the police department, certain politicians, certain doctors, psychiatrists and nurses and newspaper reporters relate in a cruel and self-serving manner. These leaders have the power to destroy this woman’s life.

In summary, at first the LAPD is casual and disinterested, until a few months after the boy’s disappearance when they stage a media event where they reunite Christine Collins with her son. However, she is distraught and tells them he is not her son. A forceful Captain in the LAPD, who is determined to use this reunion as a “successful” police case to improve the image of the police department’s bad reputation, and to please the police chief and the mayor, all who want this story to boost their political image.

The police Captain utilises a pediatrician and a psychiatrist to interview her, then publishes the findings in the newspaper to discredit her. When Christine Collins persists in saying this was not her son and demanding they resume the search for her boy, the police Captain accuses her of not fulfilling her duties to this boy and shouts at her, "You're a liar and a troublemaker!" She is ignored, smeared by newspapers and placed into a psychiatric hospital under Section 12, which means she is a danger to her family and herself and should not be released.

What is greatly disturbing is that medical, psychiatric and developmental science is used by unaccountable power to create a master discourse that nearly destroys her life, as it did to marginalise women in that period. Instrumental reason can be a sadistic monster when set free from justice and compassionate human values, as evidenced in its use by Nazi scientists, for example.

Christine’s rage and concern for her son surmount her fear. Yet, without a surrounding community of people whose rage grew when they discovered this injustice, she would have died in a padded cell. One key ally was a Presbyterian minister, who together with a senior

lawyer took her case to the people, the media and the law courts. The common good had to be fought for. The lawyer enables the courts to realise that the police needed checks and balances, that a judge was necessary for any Section 12 that police wanted to implement.

Rabbit-Proof Fence: story of wronged people generate new debates

Wronged innocence and unaccountable power can emerge in any society! Even benevolent authority, which our Western democracies boast, can produce cultural and social wrongs beyond the best intentions.

The treatment of Australia's indigenous peoples, since Western people's arrival, has had periods of dislocation, forced removal and exposure to unaccountable power. The film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), documents one such story.

The film's first lines reveal the institutional context:

Western Australia 1931. For 100 years the Aboriginal Peoples have resisted the invasion of their lands by white settlers. Now, a special law, the Aborigines Act, controls their lives in every detail. Mr. A. O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, is the legal guardian of every Aborigine in the State of Western Australia.

He has the power "to remove any half-caste child" from their family, from anywhere within the state.

In the remote Western Australian town of Jigalong which runs along the northern part of Australia's rabbit-proof fence, three children, Molly, Gracie and Daisy are taken when the Chief Protector signs an order to relocate the three girls to his re-education camp. The children are referred to by Neville as "half-castes", having one white and one black parent.

Again, the master discourse, steeped in Western scientific theories and ideology, states that these "half-caste" children are a danger to themselves and must be bred out of existence. The children are forcibly taken to the camp at Moore River to the north of Perth. There they are taught to become servants for the whites living in Australia. The story follows the girls as they walk for nine weeks along 2,400 kms to their home.

Such stories as this shaped new debates about the common good for indigenous people and the issues of justice and equal participation for all.

The price of the good

All our stories inform us that there is a price involved in ensuring that the common good is realized!

For John and Jesus it meant the sacrifice of their lives! It meant the crucifixion for Jesus. Life was given to ensure leaders, structures and the ordinary person and their communities, particularly those marginalised were seen and valued.

The common good, the life of Jesus shows us, is an ultimate value to God. John does not die alone, but is seen, grieved for and valued by God.

Community is vital in seeking the common good. John's body is cared for by his disciples. The Presbyterian minister and the lawyer accompany Christine Collins. The three aboriginal girls supported each other. The support of non-indigenous people in the debate about the rights of Aboriginal people was important for the vote and land rights, such as Fr Frank Brennan.

We are always called by the Spirit of God to be aware and vigilant, aware and curious, related to all of life to hear and see what is going on, in our structures, communities, families and our church.

And to have the courage to be prophets who indict and invite the common good!