

# *unthinkable?*

a sermon preached on the  
*eighth sunday after pentecost*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by fr richard wilson*

the lections: 1 Kings 3.5-12; Ps 119.129-133; Romans 8.26-39; Matthew 13.44-58

King Solomon is revered in Judaism and Christianity for a long and prosperous reign, great wealth, and great wisdom. He was, not least, the successor of King David. The short excerpt from the first book of Kings we heard this morning reflects the awe in which he is held, called on by God in a dream, respectful of God especially God's relationship with David, and a seeker after wisdom for the purpose only of serving his people, the ones chosen by God.

A wider reading of Solomon's life, that can be found in the first eleven chapters of 1 Kings gives a markedly different view of him. He came by the throne through an intrigue that involved his mother, Bathsheba, and a bloodbath of murder to rid himself of rival half-brothers, including one who was seeking sanctuary, murdered while he was still holding the horns of the altar.

Solomon used his power to contravene the Torah directly and escape accountability to the people by taking a foreign wife, the daughter of Pharaoh; indeed, according to 1 Kings, he was so in love with foreign women that he surrounded himself with 700 princesses (his wives) and 300 concubines which, even allowing for the biblical literary device of hyperbole, makes Hugh Hefner look like an amateur. He gathered prodigious wealth to himself and held banquets of unimaginable sumptuousness, which given the poverty of the land, must have left a large part of his community hungry.

Using his massive wealth, he set about building the first temple in Jerusalem, for which he is famous. At the dedication of the temple, Solomon assumes the role of chief priest (which in contemporary sensibility contravenes the principle of the separation of powers) and prays the dedication prayer, set out in 1 Kings 8. In a close reading, that prayer looks mostly like a set of instructions for God to follow in service to the kingdom, which really means, in service to Solomon himself. This sense of personality cult becomes more apparent when we read that he also built a palace of rival grandeur. Who exactly, we might ask at this point, is being worshipped?

The ambition in Solomon's dream, as we read this morning, and in his dedication prayer is redolent of an election campaign. Walter Brueggemann names this 'Royal Consciousness', a particular attitude to power that loses sight of the reality of being human in community, an extreme form of narcissism. Israel had experienced it before, in Egypt under the Pharaohs. Ultimately God rejects Solomon and a revolution overthrows him. As Paul writes, God searches the heart and knows what is the mind of the Spirit.

Brueggemann accuses Solomon of reinstating paganism in Israel. He argues that Moses, in the Exodus rejected the royal consciousness of Pharaonic rule and power, creating a counter-community by leading the Israelites out of Egypt. In the new community Moses did not recreate royal power but structured the community on a prophetic consciousness with three principle features. First, God was free to be God of the people, not domesticated to royal purpose as in the case of Pharaoh

and Solomon. Second, Moses created radical equality where being in community necessitated shared wealth and where affluence was forbidden so that none prospered at the expense of the other. Third, justice and compassion was the foremost principle for ordering community.

This Mosaic counter-culture continued until Israel demanded a king. Beginning with Saul the first king and Solomon's grandfather, the change away from Mosaic counter-community to royal consciousness continued through David to Solomon, who put it finally to rest.

Of course, on this side of history we understand the refounding of this counter-community is what Jesus came to do. We now call it the Kingdom of God. Its shape is most completely set out in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount where the old order of the Kings, the Pharisees and the Scribes is upturned. Later in Matthew, Jesus describes it more concisely as the pearl of great price, something so valuable you would sell all your worldly goods to obtain, something that stands outside the consciousness of this world.

This was the model of the first century church and we heard in Paul, writing to the Romans, his argument that God's love in Jesus Christ exceeds all that we need or want from this world. This consciousness of the first century church resists Solomon's paganistic overthrow of Moses' counter-community and a new community is established from the margins.

But, as Brueggeman points out, it survives only until the Enlightenment of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the pattern of Solomon returns. Affluence becomes the chief objective of the people, with the support of the State in a form of economics that values consumption and growth over all else, and which relies on the labour of the marginalised, e.g, in low-cost factories in Bangladesh, to deliver the affluence of the elite without sharing it. See Eva Cox's article in *The Conversation*, dated 27 July 2017 for a discussion on inequality. God is relegated to human service by being privatised so that there is no possibility of religion critiquing the State - we call it secularisation. Brueggemann points out that we extol this royal tradition. He says ours is an economics of affluence in which we are so well off that pain is not noticed or we can eat our way around it. That ours is a politics of oppression in which the cries of the marginal not heard or are dismissed as the noises of 'kooks and traitors'. Ours is a religion of eminence and accessibility in which God is so present to us that his abrasiveness, his absence, his banishment are not noticed, and the problem is reduced to psychology.

The question I ask myself is: do I have the courage and selflessness to take this critique of community to heart and actually do something more serious than just talk about it? I share a disquiet with Brueggemann. He says '[p]erhaps you are like me, so enmeshed in this reality that another way is unthinkable'. I hope you are challenged as I am.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Mineapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 2nd edition, 36.