

# Sermons at St Paul's

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 12, 2015

Carroll Anne Sheppard; Licensed Preacher, Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

Bishop Steven Charleston, who will visit St. Paul's this October, points out that both John the baptizer and Jesus were exiles. John began preaching that more than lip service was required for salvation – it would take true repentance. Such repentance as Elijah and the other great Jewish prophets had preached was symbolized for John by baptism – a washing of both the external body and the inner heart. His vehement preaching made many people very uncomfortable. So he withdrew into the wilderness beyond the towns and cities, where he lived on scavenged food and wore skins of animals. And he continued to preach and attract crowds.

He was an exile from his community – a solitary prophet crying in the wilderness. The documents that survive do not tell us whether his withdrawal was voluntary or forced by public opinion, but John's territory is traditionally “the wilderness” and that is where people had to go to find him.

We know that Jesus was one of the people who sought him out. Jesus listened to John's preaching and was baptized by John. Then he himself was led into the wilderness, according to Mark's gospel and survived as John did for forty days. He emerged a changed person, committed to teaching, healing and preaching about God's Way of Love. He performed miracles and drew crowds who wanted to hear this astonishing new way of serving God.

Last Sunday's gospel reading told us that when Jesus tried to return to his hometown to teach, he flabbergasted people with his new conception of God. They listened in disbelief, and rejected Jesus the carpenter they had known from boyhood. Who was this person? They were offended by him. Jesus in turn was hurt by their rejection, and began his exile.

Exile is not a concept we understand easily, because most of us think we do not know any exiles. Steven Charleston says that nearly all Native Americans are exiles, living now in marginal lands far from their original homes. Our young people are with our Assistant Rector Manny this week visiting the Standing Rock reservation of the Lakota Sioux in North Dakota. There they will see what life for these Native Americans is like – what exile is like.

Exile. Today there are more refugees across our planet who have fled violence, political oppression, disease or starvation than there were people alive in Jesus' and John's times. Many are precariously housed and fed in camps, and they do not know

when they can return home. Are they refugees or exiles? Exiles know they probably can never go home again.

The prophet Amos in our Old Testament reading today learns the price of his prophecy that Israel will go into exile: he himself is told to leave: ***“O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there....”***

Jesus, Amos and John remind us, in their exile, what faithfulness to God can mean here on earth.

Exile. Our world is full of exiles, and yet we seldom talk about them. But we know, or have known exiles. And we may have experienced exile ourselves.

This week on NPR, I heard about the work of the members of Rotary International in bringing the reality of the AIDS/HIV plague into mainstream consciousness for the past thirty years. They and others have devoted themselves to breaking down the stereotypes that exiled those with AIDS in the ‘70’s and ‘80’s into isolated and secret deaths. Today they are working to prevent the spread of HIV between mothers and their babies in Africa. Today thousands of people have benefitted from the medicines and treatments that can put the disease into remission. A diagnosis of HIV no longer means exile.

This week our Supreme Court ruled that marriage equality should be the law of our nation. We heard story after story about people exiled from normal life in family and community, now able to marry and raise children, to be with their ill spouses in hospitals, now able to be full participants in their hometowns. Being in a same-sex marriage no longer means exile

So exiles are people we know. And exile may be, as it was for Jesus and John, social or cultural exile. John was prevented by Herod from return to his home; Jesus still walks with those who know exile of any sort. We should rejoice that people who contract certain diseases, like cancer and HIV are no longer exiles. And we should be wary of being like Herod. Yes, Herod. He is a warning and an opportunity for us.

Mark tells us that Herod had sent men to arrest John and put him in prison. He feared John, “knowing he was a righteous and holy man,” and Herod’s wife, Herodias, hated him. John had named her as sinful, and she wanted him gone.

Herod was intrigued by John, and sought him out for conversation. Mark tells us: “When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.” While John was in prison, in further exile, Herod could indulge himself by listening to a holy man and a prophet. Until Herodias figured out a strategy to get rid of John, Herod could continue enjoying his captive.

I never thought I would hear of, or ever be invited to watch, a beheading. It seemed so safely distant – by centuries – from the world I lived in. And then ISIS or ISIL, the terrorist organization that seeks to create a new caliphate for radical Islam, began its rampage through Iraq and Syria. Half the population of Syria has now fled to

other countries, becoming refugees and perhaps exiles – history alone will tell us – in the face of this violence.

Echoes of John – exile and beheading. Like Herod, ISIS has beheaded some of their captives, and caused the exile and death of millions of others. Herod beheaded John with reluctance; I cannot speak for ISIS' intentions. Just as we reject Herod's action; so we reject ISIS.

But we must stop and examine our own consciences. When have we by our own actions or our community's created exiles? The AIDS sufferers, the gay and lesbian and transgender people, the ethnic or racial sub-communities, the mentally or emotionally challenged, those with certain diseases – all have suffered exile in much the same way that the lepers of Jesus time suffered exile.

Our comfortable assumptions about the way the world should work may allow us to keep our social exiles in cultural as well as physical prisons from which they cannot easily escape. We are learning more and more about police violence and the incarceration rates of young men of color that effectively place them in exile from their communities and our society.

We must be very, very careful that we do not, like Herod, have a token favorite we keep around, so that we may enjoy what we as a society have imprisoned and exiled.

And equally, if we have been exiled from our families and home communities by past actions or injustice, that we do not wear our exile like a badge of honor without seeking to resolve and heal the breach.

The way of Jesus, radical and ever new, is the Way of Love. For that he willingly gave his life. He turned his exile into peace and healing. He yearns for a world in which there are no exiles.

The words of our psalm today offer us a song from ancient Israel, a vision of God's world healed and made whole that we may continue to sing until all exiles and refugees return home.

*Mercy and truth have met together;  
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.  
Truth shall spring up from the earth,  
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.*

*Amen.*