

Date: August 6, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 18

SERMON: Famous Last Words

Text(s): 2 Samuel 23:1-7; 1 Kings 2:1-4

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All over the world, throughout human history, there appears to have been a fascination with remembering the last words of people who have died. Whether they have been celebrities or politicians or missionaries or comedians or soldiers or academics or kings or housewives, their last words have been remembered by someone and often preserved for posterity.

I knew that this was a common and universal practice, but I didn't realize quite how extensive a practice it has been, until I decided to Google the phrase "famous last words." Up came page after page of web sites, each one with page after page of collections of the last words of an astonishing variety of people. Some of them are funny, some filled with biting satire, some angry, some profound, some trite, some witty, but there they are, by the thousands. One of my favorites is still the sentence spoken by Groucho Marx: "Die, my dear? That's the last thing I'll do." Leonardo da Vinci, on his deathbed, reportedly said, "I have offended God and mankind, because my work did not reach the quality it should have." If da Vinci's work didn't "cut the mustard," it makes me wonder if anyone's could. A couple months ago, Jaroslav Pelikan died. One of the past century's greatest church historians and teachers, his encyclopedic knowledge of the Christian tradition will keep students edified and challenged for many years to come. In a tribute to Pelikan, an equally famous colleague and friend, Martin Marty said that Pelikan's last words were reported to have been, "*If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. If Christ is not risen, nothing else matters.*" Those are words I'll be pondering for some time to come.

Last words are special and long-remembered just because they are *last* words. We say so many words in our lifetimes, and many of them are more important or powerful than our

last words, which may or may not even be entirely lucid. But we accord special importance to last words nonetheless.

So universal is this penchant for remembering and preserving last words, that in the past, it was the custom of court historians or chroniclers to invent suitably significant last words for important people. Ancient historians weren't as bound to the search for hard facts as historians today are. Rather, they sought to use history to teach moral lessons. So if a famous person died, suitably memorable last words had to be preserved, or in many cases, made up by the historian so that the lessons could be learned.

The two somewhat different versions of King David's last words that we heard this morning, are a case in point. Both of them, the first a poem or song, probably for use in liturgical or ceremonial settings and the second, where David is heard giving a final charge to his son Solomon come from the 7th century before the Common Era, approximately 300-350 years after David's life. At that time, a new king, Josiah, instituted a series of sweeping and significant religious, political and social reforms. The Mosaic Law had been all but forgotten. Israelite religion had become largely a civil religion in many ways, serving to prop up the programs of the ruling elite rather than to challenge the dominant cultural and political values. Social injustice flourished with the gap between rich and poor growing ever larger.

But then, back in a dusty corner of the Temple, where hardly anyone ever went anymore, some old scrolls were found that no one had looked at in a century or more. They were the scrolls of the Torah, the law of God given through Moses, the very charter and foundation of Israel's existence as a people divinely chosen and commissioned to be God's agents in the world.

Josiah saw the potential power in this rediscovery immediately. Here was something around which the nation could rally. Here was a powerful tool to help a people regain a sense of

its identity and purpose.

Imagine, if you can for a moment, that our Constitution had been lost for a couple hundred years--since the beginning of the 19th century for example. Let's imagine that none of the developments in our country since the period before the Civil War have been based on the principles laid down in our Constitution. Imagine that as a nation, we had forgotten all about the Bill of Rights. What do you suppose our society would be like today? And then imagine, some gray little archivist down in the dusty basement storage rooms of the Library of Congress comes across a discolored piece of paper which begins, *We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish Justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*

Imagine what the impact of such a discovery might be. That's the kind of impact the rediscovery of the Mosaic Law had in Judah. It sparked a general religious and political reform. That reform was so important that we owe a significant section of the Old Testament to it. The book of Deuteronomy— or Second Law— where the Law of Moses was reinterpreted for a new day became the centerpiece of a reworking and retelling of Israel's history which includes all the books from Deuteronomy through II Kings.

It was the Deuteronomic historian to whom we owe both versions of the famous last words of David which we heard this morning. First, the poem or song:

*The one who rules over people must be just,
ruling in the fear of God.
And he shall be as the light of morning when the
sun rises,
Even a morning with out clouds,*

*as the tender grass springing up out of the
earth,
clear, shining after-rain.*

Here we see David being transformed into the ideal of the righteous king. If you've been here through this series of sermons on David, you'll be aware that this is hardly the portrait of David given us by the original narrator of 2 Samuel. We've seen David, the military genius, the arrogant king who takes what he wants when he wants it, and who then intrigues and murders to cover up his crimes. We've seen David the penitent monarch who humbles himself under the accusation of the prophet and returns to God, promising to become a person who does justice. We've seen David the bereaved father and tender-hearted comforter of his wife. If we had taken the time to work all through the rest of the stories of David, we'd have seen him as the King whose reluctance to punish a favored son for raping his half-sister sparked a rebellion among his sons that drove him into exile and ultimately broke his heart. Whatever else we've seen of David, we've seen a human being, about as real as they come, warts and all. In his times, he was a figure larger-than-life.

But after his death, he becomes something more. In the hands of Josiah and his reformers, the stories of David took on new meaning. In particular, David is given some last words to say that will set the stage for once again holding up God's standard of justice as the goal for the nation's political and social relationships.

Rulers must be just, ruling in the fear of God, which simply means, remembering that they themselves are accountable for their stewardship of their office. They don't rule as absolute monarchs, using and abusing whom they will. They answer to God, and God demands that justice be the foundation of society, and that the ruler's decrees be the means by which that justice is maintained and applied.

In the second version of the famous last

words of David at the beginning of the Book of Kings, David is portrayed as speaking his final words to Solomon, his son who will succeed him on the throne. He exhorts Solomon to keep the law of God, walking in God's ways, obeying all the statutes and commandments in the law of Moses. And if Solomon will do this, David says, *“Then the Lord will establish his word that he spoke concerning me: ‘If your heirs take heed to their way, to walk before me in truthfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel.’”* It's not hard to see why these are famous last words, is it? They promise, not just that Solomon will enjoy God's blessing, but that a dynasty will be established, a dynasty that will endure because it is founded upon reverence for God expressed through supporting and maintaining truth and justice.

I'm reminded of something G. K. Chesterton once said about Christianity, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried at all.” The same could be said about a ruler who reveres God and rules with justice. Nothing wrong with the ideal; the problem is, that rulers are only too human— like David was. It's hard to be a ruler and not succumb to the arrogance of power, which always produces injustice rather than justice. There's been a commercial on TV recently for a new show coming in the fall. The character is a prosecutor nicknamed “Shark,” and in the commercial one of his associates asks, “Aren't we trying for justice? And Shark, who's apparently going to be an insufferably arrogant SOB, replies, “Justice? No, what we want is to win. Justice we leave to God.” In other words, justice is for some other world; in ours, there's only the politics of power and competition. That's why we need, perhaps more than ever, to hear David's famous last words.

It's also why the people of God, whether in ancient Judah or in contemporary America cannot afford to allow loyalties to particular

political parties or to particular political and social philosophies to determine how we live our lives or what policies we will adopt. Whether we're Republicans or Democrats or Greens or whatever, our moral touchstone is not whatever the politicians or social theorists or the party hacks or the celebrities of the day are pushing. Our touchstone must always be God's demand for justice and truthfulness both in interpersonal relationships and in the larger society. That's really our calling as the Church. To use an apt metaphor for people who live in Maine, we're to be a lighthouse, a beacon, warning of the dangerous rocks and shoals of injustice and untruthfulness and calling ourselves and our nation to be a nation where justice and truth are more than a rhetorical slogans in electoral politics. We have to model such justice and truthfulness in our own life together, and we must exhort and warn and invite others to just and truthful relationships as well.

Josiah himself, though he made some politically disastrous foreign policy decisions, nevertheless is remembered chiefly as the king who brought the nation back to the standards that reflected its ultimate loyalty to God, and the story of those reforms have become a permanent part of the scriptures that both Jews and Christians hold sacred. Half a millenium later, in new circumstances, in a new world governed by Roman emperors, the hopes expressed in David's famous last words were rekindled in the hearts of those who, by faith, saw their fulfillment in the life and death of a man from Nazareth named Jesus.

And even when Jesus met his own disaster at Calvary, yet the hope still did not die. In the very teeth of grim reality, there were those who found their hopes rekindled and their courage rejuvenated, and their resolve to live as God's people, a people of justice in the world of Roman imperial power by remembering Jesus' own last words.

When we gather around the Lord's Table

time after time, what do we repeat, but those last words of that man from Nazareth? Words spoken to some friends before the pain and agony of the cross the next day. *“Take, eat; this is my body given for you.” “Drink this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant shed for you.”* Or as St. John fashions those last words, *“I am the living bread. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever trusts in me will never be thirsty.”*

Famous last words. Words with power to give life in the face of death. Words with power to give hope. Words that do not look to outward circumstances to find confirmation of their truth, but which call for faith, for trusting where we do not see. Words that invite us to take all sorts of risks for the sake of truth and justice. Simple words. Their very simplicity is their power. Words that infuse our struggles and pain and dying with hope and life. Words that call us back to our roots. Words that reconstitute us as a people every time we say them. Words that bind us together, that energize us to be a people who stand for justice and truth, even when that stand runs against the political and social trends of the day. Words that can give you and me the courage to live justly and truthfully in the offices and boardrooms of corporations and the classrooms of schools and universities and in the wards of hospitals and in the streets of Brunswick and beyond, even to the whole world.