

Joshua 15:16-19;
Psalm 146:1-2; 5b-7; 8-10 R: *We sing to God all our life long.*
Hebrews 13:8-16
Mark 12:13-17

When the Bible Horrifies Us

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A few years ago, John Shelby Spong gave a Burke Lecture entitled “The Terrible Texts of the Bible.” The readings of last week, and some from this week, raise questions similar to those Spong raised. Why do we read stories like those of Herodias and the death of John the Baptist, or the story of Esther, or Caleb’s daughter? They make women subservient at best, manipulating and evil at worst. Doesn’t reading these stories affirm their implications? Why don’t we ignore these texts? And, for God’s sake, are they really the Word of God???

In the face of millennia old assumptions and dogmas, we need to remind ourselves from time to time what intelligent faith means, and ask ourselves why we do what we do. We need to question whether passages of Scripture which are horrifying and repugnant can truly be God’s word to us.

In his book on the same subject, entitled The Sins of Scripture, Spong argues that, the belief that every word in the Bible is God’s Word, is a claim that cannot endure. He discusses the impact of this belief on how humans address many areas of religious and secular life, including women. He identifies Scripture passages that assume women are *not* made in the image of God; women are the source of evil; and female biology is unclean and unholy. He discusses the validation of violence implicit in the notion of God as judge who punishes evil, disobedience and unfaithfulness. The syllogism is implicit but clear. If women are evil, violence against women is divinely approved.

The story of Herodias and the execution of John the Baptist *is* horrifying. Herodias is violent, self-absorbed, closed to the implications of her lifestyle, and willing to use her daughter to take revenge on John the Baptist. Although likely based on an historical event, the framework of the story, a man so star-struck by a woman that he offers her up to half his worldly wealth, is clearly legendary. What needs confrontation, analysis and refutation in this story are the underlying cultural assumptions that made the event possible and the story riveting. Underlying Herodias’ actions are her limitations as a woman, albeit a woman married to a ruler with considerable power. As a woman, she is his property. Her capacity to control her own life depends totally on his power. She is denied self-determination, as so many women still are today. Her only path to power was through a powerful man. So she manipulates, uses and abuses the power she has to protect her reputation and her husband’s. John dared to criticize their marriage. His execution makes a powerful statement: public criticism of the ruler is punishable by death, even if the critic is a popular prophet.

Most of what is appalling and horrifying about the story of Herodias is culture and politics, sanctioned by religion. Herodias uses the methods men of her culture used: brutality and violence, to accomplish vengeance and protect their power. Her actions are horrible; but they are a mirror of the culture and the political brutality of the world in which she lived. She, and the women she represents, are not the problem.

The story of Achsah reveals similar offensive assumptions. She is given in marriage by her father, Caleb, to whomever does his errand of violence and political conquest. He can do so because his daughter is his property. She has no voice in determining her future. He literally “gives her away” in exchange for his personal empire building. Culture sanctioned this situation. Religion blessed it as God’s will.

The story of Esther describes a woman, chosen to be the wife of a foreign emperor in whose land she dwells as an exile. Her subservience is obvious in the way she speaks to him. Her story reflects similar cultural assumptions about women, and similar patterns that emerge in the conduct of women when they are the property of males with no power over their personal destiny. What makes Esther different from Herodias, is that she uses her access to power to save her people from destruction, death and extermination. She doesn’t ask for personal wealth, nor act out rage on her enemies. She only asks that her life, and the lives of her people, be spared. Because of her request, the emperor kills Haman – who was plotting the extermination of the Jewish people; but not because Esther demanded his death.

So why *do* we read these stories, especially in liturgy? I suggest that, as Christians, we are responsible for knowing what’s in the Bible, this book we call holy, this book we call God’s word. Women’s issues are key in our time, key for the life of the world. We need to know what the Bible says about women. We are responsible for explaining to ourselves and others *why* not everything in the Bible is God’s immutable word. We are called – for God’s sake as well as humanity’s – to sort out what is truly God’s word in our time from what is history, culture and politics. We are called to be culture makers in our church and in our world.

No one has been more maligned than God. We are called to speak up and speak out when others use the Bible to justify violence, hate, ignorance and brutality, and attribute them to God’s word and will.

We are called to reject as God’s word anything in Scripture inconsistent with Jesus’ life, teaching, death and resurrection, even as we embrace what we reject as part of our ancestral history. It’s what Jesus did. He rejected parts of Scripture that did not adequately reflect the reality of God. The difficulty, which can’t be ignored, is that Christians don’t agree on the meaning of Jesus’ life, teaching, death, and resurrection. While this is true, we’re nonetheless called to use *our* understanding of the kerygma to know and love God. We have to be honest about the terrible texts of the Bible and confront whether they are God’s word. It’s a daunting task but one we take on – for God’s sake – and for the life of the world.