

Toxic Chosenness

A sermon on 2 Samuel 11:1-15 & John 6:1-21 by Nathan Nettleton, 28 July 2024

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Message

When misunderstood, being “the chosen” can mutate into a toxic culture of entitlement that produces horrific criminal behaviour, and Jesus calls us to join him in challenging that culture.

Sermon

In the chat rooms after my sermon last Sunday, Gilbert commented about how preachers shouldn't try to say everything in one sermon. At the time, he was saying that in defence of me for not having addressed something he would have liked me to address. You can't address everything. After tonight's sermon, he may want to reiterate the comment for the opposite reason.

There is a lot going on in tonight's Bible readings – even our gospel reading contained three separate stories – and there is a lot going on in the world news at the moment, and I'm seeing all sort of connections. At risk of falling foul of that temptation to try to do too much, there are a lot of pieces in this sermon. It may just be a mess, but I hope I can tie them together sufficiently to make some sense to you all.

Let me start by giving you the short summary of the main point I am hoping will tie all this together, and hopefully that will help you to keep track of where I'm going as I veer all over the place.

There is a theme of “chosenness” that runs right through the Bible: the chosen people under their chosen king in the chosen promised land; the chosen messiah; etc. And the problem with the concept of being “the chosen” is that, when misunderstood, it can mutate into a toxic culture of entitlement which can enable horrific and criminal behaviour. “Chosenness” can bring a dangerous belief of being above the law and beyond critique. Jesus calls us to join him in challenging that toxic culture and liberating the world from it.

Two of the things dominating the news headlines recently have been politics in the USA and the war in Gaza, and I'm seeing connections to both in our readings. But let me start with American politics. The attempted assassination of Donald Trump, and Joe Biden stepping aside for Kamala Harris have been front page in the last week or so, but I want to begin with something that happened shortly before all that. Donald Trump had a significant win in the courts.

The US Supreme Court ruled that the US President is totally immune from prosecution for official acts as president related to his core constitutional duties. As one of the three dissenting judges warned, “in every use of official power, the president is now a king above the law.”

Meanwhile, tonight in our reading from the second book of Samuel, we heard another story of a king who regarded himself as entitled to be above the law. In fact he literally was above the law, as pretty much all kings were throughout most of history. Tonight we heard of King David committing a rape and a murder. Next week we will hear him accused of sin by Nathan the prophet, and told that he will be punished by God, but there is never even the

slightest suggestion that David might face any sort of criminal sanction or civil punishment for what he had done. He was literally above the law.

And just in case you are shocked or confused by me saying that David raped Bathsheba, let me quickly point out the key bits of evidence. Firstly, despite the fact that women in those days as in these days were often blamed for their own rapes, the Bible never ever, even once, labels Bathsheba as an adulteress or accuses her of sin. Lots of people since then have blamed her, but since the Bible never does, we can safely assume that that is just another example of our ongoing tendency to excuse powerful men and blame women for inciting those who assault them. The Bible holds David solely responsible in this case.

Secondly, the biblical language is quite clear about this being a rape. There is not even a hint that Bathsheba's consent was sought or given. It says that he sent members of the palace guard to take her, and she was brought to him, and he had sex with her. The Hebrew word that is used to say that he sent them to "take" her is a quite forceful and violent word. It's not "to invite her over". It is more like "to seize her" or "to grab her". David abducted and raped Bathsheba. And then, in an attempted cover-up, he murdered her husband. Because he could.

And yet, over and over again, the Bible describes David as the chosen one, the anointed king chosen by God to lead God's chosen people. So exalted is the overall view of David that even Jesus is described as the "Son of David", or "the New David", since that was one of the accepted and expected descriptions of the messiah.

Now we could use this story to explore the depths of David's repentance and the extravagant generosity of God's forgiveness. We could talk of how it shows that no matter how horrifically you have sinned, you have not fallen beyond the reach of God's forgiveness or God's capacity to redeem and transform you. The Apostle Paul was also a murderer prior to his conversion. We could explore all that, and it would be absolutely true. But because of what is going on in the world at present, I want to go somewhere else with it tonight.

I want to ask about this concept of chosenness, and whether it has a tendency to be misunderstood and to mutate into something toxic and dangerous. A few weeks ago, we heard the story (1 Samuel 8:4-20) of God warning the people that if they choose to have a king rule over them, that king will inevitably be corrupted by the power of being the chosen one, and will become a tyrant. Among the things they are warned of is that kings will see themselves as entitled to take your daughters for themselves and take your sons to serve in their armies. Tonight we heard the warnings come to pass. And we also saw evidence that the chosen one was regarded, by themselves and others, as entitled to be above the law, immune from prosecution.

Donald Trump also seems to be regarded by millions of Americans as "the chosen one". The messianic language used of him has ramped up further since his supporters began describing his recent escape from death as a miraculous intervention by God. And like David, he has seen his wealth and power as entitling him to sexually grab any woman he wants, and he has been given immunity from prosecution for what he does as the chosen ruler. Perhaps those biblical warnings we heard a few weeks back should stand as a warning about what we can expect, even today, if we put our rulers above the law.

But there is another major story in our news feeds that is also impacted by the concept of being the chosen ones, isn't there? The horrific war in Gaza is being perpetrated by the nation of Israel, and our Bibles clearly and continuously identify Israel as being God's chosen people. And for many many Israelis, including some of the more militant factions in the current coalition government, that concept of being the chosen people is central to the motivations and justifications for the brutal subjugation of the Palestinian people.

Although there is a strong tradition in the Bible, expressed most clearly in the book of Deuteronomy, that says that the land that has been given to the chosen people will only continue to be held by them if they live by the teachings of the Torah which include clear commands to welcome and provide for the foreigners and aliens in the land, that connection seems to have been lost. Instead, the self-understanding of being the chosen people who have been promised this land by God has mutated into a belief that everyone else is the "unchosen" and have no right to be in the land, and have no rights if they are in the land.

The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, addressed the US Congress last week, and made it very clear that he does not accept that there can be any legitimate criticism of his leadership or of Israel's military action in Gaza. He and others have consistently dismissed any and all criticism of Israel's actions as being anti-semitic. When Jewish people themselves voice the criticisms, they too are accused of anti-semitism and portrayed as self-hating Jews.

It seems that Israel – not all Israelis, but certainly the state and its ruling government – understand themselves to be above the law. Chosenness supposedly means that they are entitled to defy international law in order to occupy the Palestinian territories, impose apartheid on the Palestinian people, and now bomb Gaza into oblivion, killing tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians. And many of us evangelical Christians have unquestioningly supported them, believing that the chosenness described in our Bibles entitles Israel to be beyond criticism or condemnation.

But here's the thing. The Bible does not say that the chosen people can do no wrong and are immune to criticism or condemnation. Yes, there are stories like the story of David we heard tonight that show that the chosen king and many of the people around him regarded him as having the right to do anything he liked, even if it was criminal, and regarded him as immune to criticism or prosecution. But next Sunday we will hear a prophet sent by God confronting King David over this rape and murder, and treating him very much as liable to criticism and condemnation. The chosen king can become corrupt and will be called to repent and change.

And in the writings of many of the Biblical prophets, we will find clear and sustained criticism and condemnation of Israel and its actions. The chosen people can become corrupt and are called to repent and change. The Bible clearly and frequently legitimises criticism of Israel whenever it fails to live up to its calling to be the people chosen by God to be a light to the world that reveals God's love and tender care for all the world's peoples.

Jesus stands squarely in the tradition of those prophets, calling the chosen people to repent and change and recover their calling to be a light to the world and a shining example of God's generosity and abundant love. One of the things that Israel is accused of doing in Gaza in the present war is using starvation as a weapon by making it impossible to get adequate food deliveries in from outside. Jesus, by contrast, in tonight's gospel was seen indiscriminately

and abundantly feeding the hungry crowds. There was no vetting of the crowd to ensure that only chosen Israelites were being fed. God's abundance is for all.

The kingdom of God which Jesus proclaims and models is a massive culture change that we are all chosen and called to be a part of. These stories tonight have highlighted various aspects of that culture change. In the kingdom of God, the culture of God, there will be no entitlement for men to exploit their wealth or power to sexually exploit others and expect to get away with it. In the kingdom of God, the culture of God, there will be no entitlement for any nation or people group to disregard the rights of others and claim a privileged exemption from scrutiny or critique. In the kingdom of God, the culture of God, there will be no withholding of the earth's abundant food supplies from the hungry masses. In the kingdom of God, the culture of God, chosenness will be precisely for the purpose of embodying and sharing this radically new culture.

In the final part of tonight's gospel reading, Jesus's chosen disciples found themselves in a boat, rowing against a fierce wind. Unlike some similar stories in the other gospels, this one doesn't say they thought they were going to sink and drown. It just says that the sea was rough and a strong wind was blowing and it was dark.

And I wonder whether we can see ourselves in that, because following Jesus and seeking to be part of the culture change that he is calling for often have us feeling like we are pushing against strong winds. Winds of war. Winds of tribalism and division. Winds of sexual abuse. Winds of privilege and entitlement and corruption. Going against those winds will never be an easy journey.

But the disciples in the boat, even when they thought they were on their own against the winds, suddenly and unexpectedly found that Jesus was with them. They were not alone, and they didn't need to be afraid. And next thing they knew, they reached the land to which they were going.

There's the promise, the hope, the good news. We are not left alone to row against the winds of toxic cultures. If we get started, and push back firmly against those dangerous winds, Jesus will be there with us, and he will see us safely to the promised land where all will be safe and all will be fed with the abundant bread of God's love, broken and shared for the life of the world.