Sermon Proper 11 Year B 2021

I know I’ve told some of this story before, but in 2009 Denise and I were able to take, what for us, was a trip of a lifetime: Italy.

The trip had a little of everything, history, art, food, scenery. And even a little vestment shopping in Assisi: [*the stole I’m wearing!*]

On the red-eye to Rome I was going over a small book introducing me to the notions of classical Christian Art but like most people who have seen a picture of Michelangelo’s David on paper there was nothing that could really prepare me for the magnificence of the real thing.

In other famous museums of Rome and Florence I was in turn amused and confused: one pudgy cherub blurred into another, after awhile I couldn’t tell if a Madonna was smiling, frowning or just smirking at all of us.

But I had a secret weapon of interpretation: Denise! As a student of art and an artist she was able to point to the slight turn of the head that signals the centre of the action; a certain bodily posture suggests a mood; different colour combos and shades of light were marks of different painters; well okay!

I was the proverbial uncomprehending tourist, but Denise helped me to comprehend, not only to see pictures but to interpret the paintings and therefore to understand and enjoy!

There is a similar dynamic at play in our readings today and finds classic expression in the call of David in our first reading.

The opening dialogue between Samuel and God reminds us that God has “adjusted” to Israel’s demand for a King but has not moved an inch in requiring that justice flow from its leaders.

Of course, Israel is already reaping the judgement of its decision; Saul, like so many kings starts off good but once he’s got a sniff of power he can’t get enough. He’s not willing to sit easily with God’s law and so is in the process of being pushed aside though at this story’s writing that is still a long way off.

God says to Samuel “I have provided [or more commonly translated as chosen] for myself a king among [Jesse’s] sons.”

The literal meaning of the verb “to choose” in Hebrew draws on the verb “to see” and the preposition “in,” “to see in.”

Kind of like in English verb “belong” draws on the verb “to be” and the adjective “long.” When you belong to a family or a church your “being” exists with that group over a length of time, be-long.

This is interesting because the other key word in this story is “to see.” There’s a deliberate contrast between seeing and seeing into, to merely see, like what I was doing before Denise helped me and to see into the heart, into the soul, in an non-surfacey way.

We might ask, but if God has already “seen in,” i.e. chosen David why doesn’t God simply tell Samuel and stop the whole charade, sorry, parade of apparently impressive young men?!

Because more than anything—and this goes to why God “adjusts” to our decisions, good or bad—God takes our “made in God’s image” seriously. God is not willing to “see in” if we’re only willing to “see in.”

God chooses through our choices, if you will. We learn to live abundant lives in the personal and social as we come to make judgements the way God does, by looking at the heart and not at surface appearances.

I like the twist at the end, after all that has transpired, we might expect David to be not only the youngest but the ugly duckling but David, like the six other tall dark and handsome brothers is himself handsome.

The point is that outward appearances, though not irrelevant to our attraction radar *are irrelevant to* God’s justice.

In our second reading Paul is defending his ministry which the Corinthians have challenged suggesting that he isn’t nearly as interesting, cultured or important as the teachers they now have.

How interesting, especially in light of our almost frantic need for the new, the spectacular, the turning towards what is most handsome, gorgeous or captures our eyeballs in whatever way.

Paul doesn’t care what the Corinthians think, not a wit for what is fashionable; his barometer for judgment is the Messiah himself.

Paul is who he is, the Corinthians and those of us here at \_\_\_\_\_\_ are who we are not because the priest is charismatic or teaches something that sounds super avant garde, but because of the Messiah’s/Christ’s love, a love demonstrated in death, not very fashionable then or now!

The Love of Christ acts like depth detector in our souls; we may see ourselves as merely inconsequential, one of those “bit characters”, one of those pudgy cherubs, that fills out the edges, but Christ begs to differ!

Christ’s love acts as a kind of “soul radar” penetrating the surface of the image we show each other, exposing our prejudice, our hatred, our diminishment of others, not to condemn us but to reconcile us!

Paul himself had experienced all of this; he had originally regarded the Messiah from the perspective of fashion and prejudice and rejected him and imprisoned and/or killed those who followed him.

But once he had been apprehended by Christ he developed a way of seeing into everyone by the Messiah’s light, in whom all things have and are becoming new.

In our culture today, there are secular versions of all this: a “racism radar,” “misogyny radar” “inequality radar; they draw from the original Christian ideal of equality (remember that Paul said in another place: there is neither Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free – Paul’s way of seeing into human reality informed by Christ)

But ripped out of context our modern society is in danger of simply reverting to canceling judgments that do not heal but further divisions. It easily loses sight of the goal.

We desperately need someone to help us move from shallow seeing to deeply seeing into our own soul and with God’s help other souls, to see into from a position of compassion and deeper understanding.

As a pastor and priest I’m constantly amazed at myself and others; many/most of us struggle with a kind of imposter syndrome; if others could really see me, my thoughts, my desires, my insecurities then they’d reject me. Much of the time we find ourselves deeply unattractive and our pride and anger is our only defense against our frightened, cowering self.

But Christ not only sees but has seen into you! And has not rejected you, the exact opposite: he has and is loving you and calling you!

Yes we are small and from the perspective of eternity inconsequential; but something small and insignificant can contain greatness. The mustard seed is us! The kingdom working in and through our smallness, our choosing, our seeing into.

The Kingdom of God rarely stands on display the way Michelangelo’s David towers over the awed tourists who see it; it rarely makes the cover of the New York Times or Vancouver Sun, it operates rather through you and I; relatively few know who we are, but joined with hundreds of millions of others in every conceivable culture, language and in every conceivable human situation, little mustard seeds of God’s love are germinating.

All of this is crucial in our culture not only of glitzy images, a culture that does can only monetize us if we stay on the surface of things, but also a culture that has descended into overt propaganda and deliberate lying all packaged in your FB newsfeed

Throw in quite reactive ideologies into the mix from the left and from the right, from different interest groups and different lobbies and the human mind begins to resemble a scrambled egg.

With all that going on, we need more than a clever unpacking of Hebrew verbs from an ancient text. And we have it!

After the fact I realized that it wasn’t merely that Denise had studied art that allowed her to interpret but she paints! When we allow God’s perspective, God’s love to define us and when we practice the vulnerability of loving ourselves and our neighbour we *do* begin to “see into”

It’s then that we become patient, allowing things to develop, like the mustard seed of the parable. In the fellowship of others who are God and neighbour lovers, justice practicers, we grow in our ability to allow the smart, the sexy and the powerful not to become siren songs that we chase after, if even in our longing.

You know who we are, right, as Paul ends the section we read from his letter today: we are the ones privileged to become the righteousness of God, the ones through whom God sees in, but also through whom God is setting things right! Amen.