

Do you ever look back of something you have done and think, "What ever possessed me to do that?" I look back on some things I have done as a priest, as a parent, as a citizen and just shake my head.

On occasions I was naïve, and/or lacked maturity and experience. At the time I didn't appreciate what my words and actions might have communicated to the other.

There have been other times when I was stressed beyond belief. When I had not paid proper attention to my own needs and pushed myself beyond my capacity to cope. The result was that I became reactive; felt threatened and responded in ways I later regretted.

Thankfully, as our New Testament reading this morning reminds us, we have a God who loves us and is prepared to offer us "Forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace."

David in the Old Testament reading is a classic example of someone who was so caught up in the moment that he lost sight of the consequences of his actions. The background to the story is that the ark of God, the vessel representing the very presence of God had been lost to Israel and had been returned.

Israel had been complacent about the worship of God and had been unfaithful. After suffering a military setback they felt that they could regain their ascendancy by having the ark of God with them at the battlefield.

The upshot was that not only were they defeated but that the ark was also captured. Capturing the ark was no prize for the Philistines. Instead of being to their betterment the ark only brought misery. They eventually devised a way of returning the ark to the Israelites.

This is where this morning's reading picks up the story. David was overjoyed that the ark had been

returned. God had found a way to restore the ark to the Israelites without human intervention.

So excited was David that he was unable to contain himself. He danced wildly and freely. So much so that his wife Michal, Saul's daughter, felt that he had made an exhibition of himself. She "despised him in her heart." The passage tells us.

David found it hard to accept any criticism of his behaviour and he and Michal had words. David insisted that what he did was justified because it was a truly momentous occasion and he had every reason to behave in the way he did.

Like many of us when we have overstepped the mark and behaved in ways, it would have been better if we hadn't; that we find it hard to accept that we have erred and accept criticism.

Whilst we might be able to excuse David's excesses as a rush of blood or excessive enthusiasm it is hard to find any excuse for

Herodias senior in the gospel account. Again a little background might help.

This is one of the few stories in the four gospels where Jesus is not the central character. Here the success of Jesus' ministry had come to the attention of Herod. He was plunged into a fit of remorse or guilt for his part in the beheading of John Baptist.

The claim that Jesus was John resurrected opened the way for Mark to tell the grisly story of John's death. Herod had married Herodias; his brother's wife. John said that was unlawful and Herodias hated him for it.

Herodias used her influence over her daughter to have her ask for John's head. Herodias, Herodias's daughter (mother and daughter had the same name) either knowingly or unknowingly used her charms, her beauty, her skill to enthrall and ensnare Herod.

Herod, like David in the Old Testament story became so caught up in the moment that he lost sight of the consequences of his actions and made an extravagant promise that cost John his head.

Herod was reckless; he had allowed himself to be placed in a vulnerable situation where he was easily manipulated. He lacked insight to accept his error of judgement and the courage to admit his wrong and put the thing right.

He showed himself to be a weak person lacking moral authority. It is hard to imagine that his standing was in any way enhanced by this episode. He held the power of life and death over John but allowed lust and pride to take precedence. He appears to be the victim of his own stupidity.

The young Herodias whose charms allowed this unhappy saga to unfold was perhaps an innocent pawn in her mother's scheme. She undoubtedly enjoyed the attention she received, (her five

minutes of fame) and perhaps like Herod was intoxicated by the excitement of the moment.

Perhaps she lacked the maturity to appreciate the consequences of her action. She did however fail to think for herself and make a reasonable response to Herod's extravagant gesture. And she failed to reject her mother's shocking suggestion.

Consulting her mother could have been the action of a young person overcome by the enormity of the opportunity placed before her, or that of an opportunist ready to exploit the hand she had been dealt. I would like to give her the benefit of the doubt.

I find little wriggle room for the actions of Herodias senior. We are told that she would have had John killed earlier but that she lacked the means to do so. Here she exploits her daughter to fulfil her evil intent.

We are not told if the outcome of Herodias' dancing was premediated by Herodias or whether when Herod made his rash promise that it was beyond her wildest dreams. She may have been caught up in the excitement of her daughter's success. Many parents live vicariously through their children and perhaps we can cut her some slack but we are not given any indication that this was other than a vicious, vindictive, hateful and premediated act.

So what are we to make of this unseemly episode and David's excesses in the Old Testament story? They remind me of my human frailties and the fact that I, that we; sometimes don't give sufficient weight to the consequences of our actions.

I'm sure that any of us who have had anything to do with Government or Diocesan decision making have been frustrated by the slowness and bureaucratic nature of the process. Many are irritated by how parishes make decisions.

Whilst there is always room for improvement in the way we do things the structures as they stand are an attempt to save us from decisions we may well come to regret. We can easily lose sight of the bigger picture;

- think only of the present and
- how things affect us now
- without giving due attention to what has gone before,
- what might happen in the future and
- how the decisions we might take or
- the actions we might be advocating will impact on others.

At an individual level we can become reactive. I find this happening to me when I have not paid sufficient attention to my own wellbeing. When I allow myself to be over extended; take on too much, get too little sleep, neglect those who love and care for me. It is then that I am likely to say and do things I would rather I hadn't.

This morning's New Testament reading reminds us that we have a God who loves us and is prepared to offer us "Forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace." The Old Testament account of David and the gospel story remind us that we humans have a great capacity lose sight of the consequences of our actions.

Appropriate checks and balances in decision making processes can assist to think carefully about the things we propose to do and appropriate self-care can play an important part in assisting us as individuals to avoid making decisions we might come to regret.

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