

Sermon for 14th July 2024, Year B, Proper 10

Preached at St Serf Shettleston

Mark 6:14-29

Sermon

Somewhere in the UK today there will be a poor curate whose very first sermon after being ordained will be on the grim beheading of John the Baptist! And let's hope it's not for a children's talk!

While the flogging and crucifixion of Jesus is harsh enough, at least with that story there is an element of heroic nonviolent resistance, wise last words and beautiful virtue to ponder and reflect on. Here we simply have John losing his head on the cruel whim of Herod's wife Herodias, and her subservient daughter. Where the crucifixion of Jesus may have seemed tragic, the image of John's head on a platter leaves one feeling utterly numb. As with much brutal and callous violence taking place in the world today, what can you even say in the face of such banal and pointless evil?

There are, of course, many similarities between John's situation under Herod, and that of Jesus when he falls under the power of Pontius Pilate. Both rulers look favourably on their captives who are prominent religious figures. Each one feels the prick of good conscience and hopes to spare the life of their prisoner, desiring conversation with them. But both care more about keeping other people happy than about exercising true justice. Herod wants to keep his wife content, while Pilate is pressured by the complaining of the Jewish leaders. So, both Herod and Pilate condemn to death innocent men. And in one final connection, the bodies of John and Jesus are both recovered after their deaths by their respective disciples and laid in tombs.

These similarities between the fates of John and Jesus will not have been lost on the first readers or hearers of Mark's Gospel. The story here is of the great struggle between Truth and Power. In John's case, Herod's power wins, and truth is silenced. The miracle is that when it comes to Jesus' turn, and power seems to have won again, that time, the outcome is very different.

Despite negative portrayals in art and literature, Herod is no pantomime villain. There is a complexity in him that many of us would recognise in our own lives. Something within Herod sees in John the kind of human authenticity to which he too is called. Pride, self-promotion and lust are powerfully at work in his life, but so is an echoing recognition that perhaps there might be something more to life than absolute power.

Not that Herod has absolute power of course. He wants it, but he can't have it. He is caught up between competing interests he cannot satisfy. He is a shadow of his father, Herod the Great. His master is now the Roman Caesar, a man who refused Herod the title of king that his father had enjoyed. He also needs to please his wife, who was previously married to his brother and now hates John for his public denouncement of them.

Herod is also no friend of the Jewish religious leaders – he prefers the Greek culture. Herod is discovering how hard it is to keep everyone happy all the time while remaining true to his own personal standards, such as they are.

Anyone who has had any role of leadership will know how hard it can be to hold to what you believe to be right, when vociferous voices are demanding change, or insisting that everything should remain the same. We all sometimes want to avoid conflict by following the path of least resistance. We don't have the energy to fight every battle. Always we ask ourselves, as the saying goes, 'is this a hill we want to die on'? It's just unfortunate that in Herod's case, his path of least resistance meant giving John's head to his wife and daughter.

The challenge for us in hearing this story is to ask ourselves if the choices we make, whether in the church or in business or in our families, are supporting God's loving transformation of the world, or are intended to protect ourselves, and keep everyone around us onside.

Sometimes we can persuade ourselves that we have done the right thing in managing a difficult situation, soothing anxious minds and heightened emotions, when in fact we've perhaps avoided the more difficult and deeper reflection that may have brought more profound change.

Back in the 1970s, American psychologist Scott Peck worked with returning Vietnam veterans in group therapy. He noticed that in any particular group, they'd always go through the same process as they sought to deal with their own, and each other's, raw and repressed emotions. Initially they'd try to be polite with each other, to avoid conflict, disagreement and anger, but while they did this, they never really made any progress – everything stayed locked up inside. Sometimes, however, in a moment of grace, something would snap, and an authenticity would erupt, full of every conceivable wild emotion. It was dangerous and scary, and at this point everyone faced a decision – do we retreat into politeness, striving to keep the peace, or do we stay honest, speak the truth, and become vulnerable to pain, but also open to the possibility of healing, and transformation?

Sometimes, hiding from conflict and disagreement by trying to keep everyone happy does no one any favours. And often that peace comes at the great expense of some other innocent party, whose thoughts and feelings – like John the Baptist's – are hardly taken into account.

Herod had the chance to take another path, to be honest with himself and his family about how John's message of repentance was attractive and challenging to him, to turn away from his craving for power and admit his human vulnerability. In the instant of his decision, Herod too was given a moment of grace, in which

his life may have turned either way. The Greeks had a word for such a moment – Kairos – in which a critical or significant decision can define our lives for years to come.

This gospel reading, with all its horror, shows us that no one is entirely evil or irredeemable, that always there are moments in our lives when even in the midst of terrible situations and impossible choices, the presence of God's grace can be felt, offering us the opportunity to choose another way, to choose redemption and authenticity. It is never an easy or painless choice, but it is, I believe, always the right one.