

The Beheading of John the Baptist

I never have known what to make of John the Baptist. Whatever I read about John makes me feel uncomfortable. I find his character, his whole personality difficult. His clothes were, apparently, bizarre, his preaching methods extreme, his anger uncontrollable at times! He had an extreme way of living and dying!

In our story this morning John had been thrown into prison because he said it was unlawful for Herod to marry his brother's wife. This was Herod Antipas, a son of the older Herod the Great who slaughtered the babies after Jesus' birth. He had seduced his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, and had married her. John, quoting Leviticus, spoke out against this union, saying it is unlawful. This is an act of adultery and was disgraceful, making those involved ritually impure, and the consequence was that such a marriage would not be blessed with children. Herod was "greatly perplexed" by this, according to Mark. But he still listened to him. Maybe deep down Herod knew that John spoke the truth. And so he didn't want to punish John, but protect him.

Herodias, however, was altogether, different. Mark says she "had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him." The opportunity came quickly. As the birthday party unfolded, everyone was thoroughly wined and dined with their inhibitions falling as the drink took effect. Scheming Herodias instructs, her daughter, Salome, to dance like some seductive prostitute in front of all the guests. Herod, likely seeing how captivated his audience was by her dancing, wanted to impress them all so he ups the ante, becoming a foolishly boastful politician by making a blank check promise no politician in their right mind would ever do. Salome can have anything. To further impress he says: "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."

The daughter, maybe surprised even embarrassed and humiliated by being coerced into dancing in such an exhibitionist manner, doesn't quite know how to respond. She consults with her mother. Mother, nursing this enormous grudge against John, sees her opportunity and tells her daughter to ask for John the Baptist's head. Simple! What a shock for Herod! If he failed to keep his promise under oath, he faces political ruin. If he did carry it out, he was murdering an innocent, holy man, who, deep down he respected. In his corner, he orders John's execution.

For a moment let us do a character assassination. Herod is an oddball. He respects and listens to John but dreads John's ferocious tongue. He feared John yet hated his message. He seemed unable to free himself from its inherent fascination. Maybe that is being human. He was impulsive, making a reckless promise without thinking. He may have been drunk. Through self-indulgence, he lost the power of judgment and did something he would regret. He feared what others thought and said.

As for Herodias, she was an embittered woman and she showed what such a woman can do. She bore a grudge against John and she was determined to eliminate the one man who had the courage to confront her with her sin. No one was going to stop her doing what she wanted. No one was telling her what to do and no one was going to remind her of any moral laws. With John gone, she could sin in peace.

And then there is John! The man of courage! The man of the desert now being locked up in a dungeon! John preferred death to falsehood. He lived for the truth

and he lost his head for it. Whatever it tells us of John, this story tells us that anyone who speaks about God and for God, must take his life into his hands.

This story, today, would sell newspapers all over the world. A sexual scandal, involving people in high political and royal places! Its about religion too! Some preacher claiming the moral high ground! Tom Wright, in his commentary, claims that God has slipped down the list of what sells newspapers in recent years but people are still aware of unanswered questions and they love a good dingdong between a preacher who seems to be an authentic spokesperson for God and politicians. On top of this we have a beheading and an act of terrorist butchery. Our Gospel story today has all the characteristics of the nasty parts of our modern society. We have shady politics, religion, sex and a beheading. All in the space of 15 verses! This story was acted out in the full glare of the royal court. It would have been around Galilee in a couple of days. Today, it would be in every newspaper, the next day, on every news channel within minutes and viral on the Internet within seconds. The whole sordid, disgusting episode is exactly the sort of thing that everyone likes to hear and gossip about however much they pretend otherwise. You can just hear the whispers in corridors, the rumours, the mutterings, the shame of it all, the 'no good is going to come out of this, mark my words' kind of quote. Within a decade Herod had been banished to Gaul, left to die in disgrace. But within a generation Mark had written about John, about his death at that shameful party and had honoured him as a great witness to the truth and to the kingdom of God.

What do we learn from this? What kind of spiritual sustenance do we get from the grisly account of John the Baptist having his head chopped off? In the story it is obvious that none of the characters were winners, not even Herodias. Was John brave and courageous? Was he too stubborn, maybe even a bit stupid? John did hold true to his own convictions and it was so good that he was vindicated when Jesus said that no mother's son has ever been greater than the John the Baptist. But it didn't end well for him. John made sin personal and the person he was dealing with was the King.

What I do believe this grim episode tells us about is to stand up for the truth. The truth is the main character in today's gospel. It is the truth that sets the story in motion, and it is the truth that we are concerned with when we come to church, and it is the truth we want to hear today. And ultimately, when we talk about the truth, it is Jesus himself who we think of. He is the Truth.

Herodias was hurt by the truth. The truth frightened and unsettled Herod. It continued to bother him after John had gone. Now, everything reminded him of John. The truth hurts us too. God's word exposes what is wrong with us: it cuts through our excuses and focuses on our sins. In fact, God's word will not be able to comfort us properly until it has hurt us properly. Christianity is ridiculed and mocked. There is something about the name of Jesus that is mocked more than any other religion or idea, often with intense hatred. Why? Because it is the Truth! That is why the truth suffers but not forever. Every true word, every true action we do – however unpopular, abused, ridiculed or just ignored – will be recognised. That was John's belief. That is surely ours too.

Why did John make a fuss? His death didn't change anything. But he was a man who stood up for what was right and true. And, in Mark's Gospel, it does come in the middle of a much bigger and far-reaching Gospel story. Jesus, like John, would be

totally innocent of the charges made against him. Jesus, like John would be executed by these same world powers because of a threat to their existence. I believe in justice, goodness and truth. If I didn't how can I make sense of my world? My challenge, like yours, is to make sure we live by it. John's beheading is a tragedy that should never have happened, but it did and yet the story, unfolding all around this tragedy is a victory. In his Gospel Mark tells us that such stories as this one are true for you and me because they give us hope that God is at work in peoples' lives; a hope that peoples' lives can be changed for the better, despite evil and tragedy. For God, in the face of evil, tragedy and suffering, is able to bring hope, goodness, life and salvation into our world today as he is in the next.

Peter Smith
12/7/15