

Reading for July 15, 2018

Reading: Mark 6:14-29 (NIV)

¹⁴ King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

¹⁵ Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago." ¹⁶ But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

¹⁷ For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, ²⁰ because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹ Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." ²³ And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." ²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered. ²⁵ At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, ²⁸ and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. ²⁹ On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

SERMON: "WHY?"

What sells newspapers? A quick peek at the magazines at the supermarket check-out will tell you: royalty, sex, scandal, political intrigue, a tragic death, and you could even throw in a bit about the downfall of a religious bigot! Mark's account of the death of John the Baptist has all these ingredients and it has provided endless inspiration for artists and writers, both ancient and modern. This story is a gift that keeps on giving to movie directors; every film on the life of Jesus has a huge section on this event, with Salome's seductive dance looked on by the lustful, half-drunk, dirty-old-man Herod Antipas!¹ The salaciousness of Mark's tale must surely detract from the primary theological rationale for its inclusion in his gospel. But what might that be? Let's start by exploring this briefly this morning.

¹ The New Testament does not name "Salome" as such (she is simply "Herodias' daughter"); nevertheless, there is other historical evidence to support this name, including art-work and Josephus.

The passage begins: “King Herod heard about this, for Jesus’ name had become well-known.” Heard about *what*? The way Mark tells it, heard about Jesus’ reputation because his 12 disciples have been out preaching in pairs throughout Galilee – as we heard last week.² Christ’s bold message that “the kingdom of God is near”³ can’t be kept secret for long, especially if it is accompanied by dramatic miracles. The question on people’s lips was, “Who is this Jesus?” Some said he was “John the Baptist raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.”⁴ This tells us two things: first, that everyone already knew this righteous prophet had been killed by Herod Antipas, and, second, that Jesus must have been doing some pretty remarkable things for people to come up with such a fanciful explanation for his miracles! Other people said Jesus was “Elijah.” Remember, in Jewish tradition Elijah did not die but was taken to be with God in a chariot of fire.⁵ Moreover, there was a prophetic expectation that Elijah would come back prior to the Day of Judgement.⁶ In fact, Mark had earlier⁷ implicitly told his readers that John the Baptist was this Elijah figure, so while the people were on the right track they clearly didn’t understand what God was doing among them. Still others took Jesus to be a prophet. Herod Antipas, so Mark tells us, thought Jesus was John come back to life! It is most unlikely that Herod believed in resurrection or reincarnation, rather he probably thought Jesus was some kind of successor to John - but Mark’s description gives the impression that Herod carried a guilty conscience and was haunted by his memory of John.⁸

This discussion on Jesus’ identity provides an opportunity for Mark to tell the story of John the Baptist’s martyrdom. Mark’s account diverges from that of the historian Josephus, who wrote later in A.D. 90. For Josephus, it was John the Baptist’s *popularity* with the crowds that was the reason for his demise. It was a matter of political expediency to strike first and to be rid of John before his following could lead to an uprising. The emergence of another prophet in Jesus would naturally cause a similar concern. In Mark’s account, however, Herod had broken the Jewish laws of decency and morality⁹ by seducing his half-brother’s wife, Herodias, and by divorcing his own wife to marry her - all this while his brother was still alive! To complicate matters, Herodias was his niece, the daughter of another half-brother, Aristobulus! And so the tabloid goings-on in the palace become part of this martyr story. Indeed, the marriage arrangements in a royal household of Herod make the sexual antics of Fleetwood Mac seem tame!

² Mark bookends this passage with the mission of the 12 disciples; Mark 6:7-13, 30-32. See also the connection with preaching and John in Mark 1:14. (See also Matt 14:1-12 and Luke 9:7-9.)

³ Mark 1:14-15.

⁴ Mark 6:14. Note, John’s ministry was *not* noted for his miracles. See also Mark 8:27–29.

⁵ See 2 Kings 2.

⁶ Mal 4:5-6.

⁷ Mark 1:1-9; see also 9:11–13.

⁸ The notion of the resurrection (of the righteous) was controversial among Jews at the time. There were also popular Greek stories, based on a hero’s death who was then restored to life, and these may well have influenced Herod.

⁹ Lev 18:16; 20:21. Moreover, such behavior was totally unacceptable to the Essenes, a strict Jewish group to which John the Baptist is often linked.

Now, the legitimacy of Herod's rule was somewhat weak, and so John's apparent stirring up of trouble, by saying Herod's marriage was an offence to God, may make it harder for him to maintain the loyalty of the people.¹⁰ So Herod had John arrested¹¹ and placed in a dungeon in Herod's hill-top fortress of Machaerus on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea.¹² Herod had enough of a conscience to fear and respect John the Baptist, but Herodias was hostile toward John and was determined to eliminate him. The climax took place at Herod's birthday party, at a banquet in front of his high officials, military commanders, and other the leading men of Galilee.

Herod's step-daughter, Salome, performed an erotic dance. Solo dances in those days were a licentious pantomime and typically associated with of professional prostitutes. The very fact that Salome performed such as dance is not only a commentary on her character, but on that of her mother, Herodias, who allowed her and encouraged her to do so. We are told the daughter "pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, 'Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you.' And he promised her with an oath, 'Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.'"¹³ This is reminiscent of foolish Jephthah's impulsive vow in Judges 11, and the rash promise to give "up to half the kingdom" echoes Esther 5:3, as Mark's Jewish readers would know! Moreover, this story parallels Elijah's confrontation with King Ahab and the wicked Queen Jezebel, which was also about a weak man and powerful woman.¹⁴ Herod's public promise - no doubt made under the influence of drink - was one that he felt honor-bound to keep. And so John was executed, and literary phrase "a head on a platter" was born.¹⁵

Mark placed this story in the context of the disciples preaching mission in Galilee. Speaking "truth to power" has never been easy or risk-free. Other examples like, Thomas More, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King Jr. are both inspirational *and* serve a cautionary function as to the potential cost of following one's beliefs. More to the point, Mark is alerting his readers to the dangers awaiting Jesus; this murderous scene may be repeated if Jesus falls foul of the authorities. As such, it is a warning and a foreshadowing of events to come. Indeed, Mark's accounts of John's death at the command of Herod and Jesus' death by the order of Pontius Pilate have much in common. Both rulers looked favorably on their captives, who are prominent religious figures; each ruler desires to spare the life of his prisoner. Both care more about pleasing their constituencies than exercising justice. Both are willing to sacrifice others to maintain their own honor, prestige and power – indeed, this remains one of the great temptations to persons in positions of authority. Both Herod and Pilate act against their

¹⁰ Indeed, the political ramifications of Herod's divorce and remarriage, in terms of national alliances, *did* disturb the peace and contribute to his eventual fall from favour with Rome.

¹¹ Mark 1:14, Matt 14:3-5.

¹² According to Josephus. Note: the official palace was in Tiberias.

¹³ Mark 6:22-23.

¹⁴ 1 Kings 18:13; 19:1-2; 21:5-29. Not forgetting, of course, the link between Elijah and John the Baptist in Mark.

¹⁵ See also Judith 13:1-16. Curiously, Mark's memorable story is unrelated to that of other martyr traditions within Judaism (e.g., 2 Macc 7). John is entirely passive; he says nothing. There are no scenes in which his brave endurance and torture is praised, no portrayal of his holding fast to his faith despite his suffering, or offers of release if he recounts. John is unceremoniously executed offstage.

“better judgment” and condemned an innocent man to death. And finally, both of the victims’ bodies are recovered by disciples laid in tombs. Mark, then, is preparing his readers for the passion of Jesus.

Consequently, the real theme of the story is the confrontation between political power and prophetic faith. Incidentally, Mark calls Herod a “king” but an earlier Roman Emperor (Augustus) refused to give him that title.¹⁶ Years after this, Herod went to Rome to plead for the title he so coveted; instead of getting that honour, the new Emperor (Caligula) banished him to Gaul (Northern France) for having the insolence for asking, and there he died.¹⁷ Whether intentional or not,¹⁸ Mark’s calling Herod a “king” contrasts him the kingdom of God. There is a stark contrast between the fading rule of the Herod Antipas, a rule based on pride, jealousy, cruelty and death, and the emerging kingdom of God under the rule of Jesus, marked by courageous faithfulness and life-giving miracles.

This story of John the Baptist’s execution forces *us* to gaze into the today’s world of corruption, lust, and power. The destructive dynamics of sexual, financial, and political intrigue remains a very real feature of human life. Whether we are talking about Monica Lewinsky or Stormy Daniels, the sexual antics of politicians, alleged or real - in Canada and in the US - the story of John’s death shows that *justice* is the ultimate victim in such situations. Evil, then, is not only founded the demonic,¹⁹ but also in centers of power: political, board room, and religious. Consequently, evil is hidden in plain sight as it coexists with our normal day-to-day existence, inflicting pain and chaos. No one is immune from this power, especially the innocent and weak. And, from time-to-time, what is hidden is made public by a whistle-blower, or a leak, sometimes revealing the tip of a swampy iceberg and a new ethical movement is born. And so one of the fascinations of the death of John is how it still resonates to today’s power plays.

As I stand back and look at the death of John the Baptist, I keep asking myself, “*Why?*” Is this what God *wanted* to happen? I find it impossible to believe that loving and purposeful God would *want* his faithful prophet to die like this; what a waste! Does John’s demise (imprisonment and death) *really* advance God’s mission? Mark never really addresses such questions, which goes to show that our fixation with the question “*Why?*” is probably a modern thing. For Mark, God was ultimately sovereign and it seems he was simply prepared to accept that fact. This scenario - of kings and their exercise of power - forces us to look carefully at the subtle relationship between *God* and power.²⁰

Christians often say God is “omnipotent” – literally, all-powerful – so why didn’t God step in and stop John from being executed? And what about Hitler, and other dictators, why doesn’t God step in and do something to stop *them*? It is perhaps worth stating explicitly that the evil humans do to each

¹⁶ He was called “Tetrarch,” meaning “ruler of a fourth part.” (After King Herod the Great died, his kingdom was split up.)

¹⁷ He died after AD 39, no one knows precisely when. Oddly enough, Herodias chose to go into exile with her husband.

¹⁸ Mark may have called him a “King” by mistake (Matt 14:1 uses the correct title), or it could be irony - to ridicule Herod for failing to secure the title he coveted and for losing his kingdom.

¹⁹ This is certainly the case in Mark’s gospel.

²⁰ This is explored further in Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Eugene, OR, Cascade, 2018).

other and to the environment, both as individuals and corporately, is the *dominant* cause for suffering on our planet. It has been estimated that governments have sanctioned over *250 million murders* over the last century; this is *six times* more people than died in combat in all the foreign and internal wars during the same time period!²¹ That is a shocking and terrifying statistic. Given the presence of such horrendous evils in the world, people often ask, “Why, then, doesn’t God use his power?” Canadian Theologian Douglas John Hall writes:

What such persons seem *not* to grasp, or even entertain, is that gods who prevent evil and set everything to rights can only do so by overruling the behavior of that one creature that creates more havoc than any other: *ourselves*. Ironically, those who most complain of God’s failure to act godlike, that is, to exercise unmitigated power, are the very ones who are most affronted by any curtailment of their *own* freedom. They want the world to be what they want the world to be, and the only god they can abide is one whose will coincides perfectly with their own.²²

He has a point, don’t you think? We want others’ power to be curtailed, but not our own!

Given the facts of history, I think the best way to look at this complex matter is this: God’s power is not a *coercive* power *over* creation, as in brute force, but an *enabling* power *for* creation. God creates (and sustains) the space and freedom for creation to grow, develop, and be itself creative. God is a *power-sharing* deity who also graciously gives genuine free-will. Such freedom allows us to *respond* to God’s self-giving love, and to have *that* over-ridden would not only be inconsistent with God’s nature, but would make a nonsense of the *freedom* necessary to love and to trust. In our times of confession, we often ask for forgiveness for what we do and don’t do – for our “sins of commission and omission,” as the old Prayer Book puts it. In other words, the freedom that God gives can be abused by what we do and by what we fail to do; things that God *desires* for us to do, but can’t *force* us to do. So, no, God didn’t *want* Herod to kill off John the Baptist, nor Pilate kill of Jesus for that matter. But God knew that evil doesn’t like to be shown up by goodness; that darkness doesn’t like light. Evil prefers secrecy, but, where necessary, will act publically to retain its power and influence.

Now while God can’t force us to work toward overcoming evil with good, God’s Spirit will certainly *help* us if we desire to *partner* with God in that task. We can pray for that with total confidence!²³ In challenging the reality of evil that actively opposes the reign of God, we can expect both success *and* failure, rejection *and* acceptance, life-giving miracles *and* death. This is the sobering contrast and warning that Mark presents to his readers, then and now. Remember, too, the wise words attributed to Edmond Burke: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.” God calls us to be faithful and follow him, just like John, Jesus and their disciples. He actively and powerfully partners with us in the ongoing task of actualizing the gracious Kingdom of God - one that never forces itself on us or others, but nevertheless makes all the difference in the world. Amen.

²¹ See <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/20TH.HTM>.

²² Hall, *Cross in Our Context*, 87, Emphasis mine.

²³ And it is also true that if we *don’t* ask for God’s help we have no right to expect to receive it!