

Sermon - Amos 7.7-15; Psalm 85.8-13; Ephesians 1.3-14; **Mark 6.14-29**

For the order of service title I used 'right thought, right action, right result' – a mantra I have used for a while now and one I use to check trails of thought that might be puzzling me or causing me to not feel quite right about the way things are going.

It came to mind as I was thinking about this drama playing out between Herod and John – and between his wife and daughter Herodias – I wonder if Herod had had thoughts of things not being quite right – followed by the thought that he was in too deep and couldn't pull out now.

I wanted to form a story around the good-feel factor of the football final and the way Gareth Southgate's integrity and niceness is being so valued and admired – that the 'good guy' is having his day – and the 'wide boy' is on the wain – but I couldn't but actually we can hold it on our minds as we think about this story....

And actually, this is also an opportunity to spend time looking at the crafting of Mark's Gospel that shaped the message of Mark's account and one that brings to life the way our understanding of the Gospel writings can be deepened and broadened through study and reflection of them.

Mark's report of John the Baptist's death marked a shift in the mission of Jesus. It had been mentioned at the beginning of the Gospel – a brief reference to 'John's arrest' and we wait until this sixth chapter to learn more about that.

This account is sandwiched between the sending out in the community by Jesus – the commissioning – of the disciples and their return.

Here we can link the story of John and Herod as a foretaste of the death of Jesus – both triggered by political motives – indeed as John is rejected here, we will have just heard – last week for us – about Jesus being rejected in his hometown.

Herod had heard of the miracle working and healings of Jesus – heard that some were calling him John the baptiser raised from the dead – or Elijah – he was intrigued by all this but - in retrospect - Herod had come to see Jesus as 'John, whom I beheaded' –

And why was that – how did Herod come to behead such a man who evoked a stirring of perplexity within him – his righteousness and holiness compelling Herod to listen to him and to actually be nourished from doing so – Herod's heart was being opened and drawn towards the spirit of all that John stood for – and John's proclamation – as we know – echoed the spirit of Jesus that was to come after him as he prepared the way for people by pointing out the error of their ways.

And that is what he had been doing with Herod – pointing out the error of his ways according to the Torah – the unlawfulness of Herod's marriage to Herodias his niece and sister-in-law. It is likely Jesus would have challenged this too – and it wasn't just from a moral standpoint but marriages of this type would also have huge political implications in the social structure of the day.

The mission of Jesus and John are being closely linked by Mark in the telling of this story – one of the longest that Mark tells – and with less immediacy and more detail – more so than the account in the gospels of Luke and Matthew – views about Jesus – Herodias – Herod's wife's grudge against John – and the conversation between mother and daughter – who was traditionally know as Salem – are all in this account alone.

Jesus' mission was initiated after John's arrest according to Mark – the continuation that John had prophesied.

And again, the unique take on how Herod saw John – in Matthew's account Herod feared the people – but here it is John himself that Herod was fearful of – because of that enigmatic lure he had upon Herod – because Herod knew there was something true about John. But along the way he comes to be a victim of his own feelings of pride and whims to the cost of standing by his own truth and principles and values.

And it is these feelings, emotions, impulses that are the darker side of ourselves – the ones that lead us to have such conflict between our hearts and our heads – our inner and outer lives – so that our lives shape out in compromises of not living out our truth and creating worlds we can never be at peace in – we are made to love and be loved – and that includes the Herods among us and the Herod parts of ourselves within us.

This is the daily struggle in a world that has lost its moral compass and values along the way – the struggle to stay true to ourselves and our principles and ideals and our integrity.

And this story says it all...

Try and imagine what it would have been like for him – a birthday party with all his friends – his daughter coming along and dancing for them – making them happy – and him honouring that with an ‘anything you want you can have’ moment – and then – after consultation with the resentful Herodias – her request for John’s head on a platter...

What would that have felt like for him?

Mark’s Herod – according to the literal translation had ‘protected’ John – v20 – because he was righteous and holy man – in Matthew’s Gospel though – Herod wanted John killed...

But here – having to fulfil his oath, Herod was ‘deeply grieved’ – so much so that the only other time the original word – perilupos – was used to describe this feeling – was when Jesus was ‘deeply grieved’ in the Garden of Gethsemane..

So this display of the big ‘I am’ – the metaphoric ‘swagger’ at his self-importance – had been his demise – there was no way out for Herod – he had no choice in the matter where honour of the day was concerned.

And talking of honour and shame culture of the day – the role of Herod’s wife and daughter was significant in that they had been deemed in this account to have been responsible for John’s death – and while there are positive stories of women in Mark’s Gospel around this story – the healing of the bleeding woman – and the honouring of the Syrophenician woman’s faith as he healed her daughter – this is rather a negative account of these two female characters – and to be executed at the hands of women in those days would have been a profound mark of shame...

But however we understand the finer details of John’s death – Herod’s personal demise – his wife and daughter’s manipulative and spiteful motives - what we can understand is that the relationship between John and Jesus is cemented in their journeys of faith and trust in God’s presence in their lives that compels them to speak of truth and justice and love – whatever the challenge to the political and social norms of the day – and ultimately, whatever the cost...

From reading about the prophet Amos – and how he had to stand firm to the words and principles that he felt God was calling him to proclaim – from hearing Ephesians about living out the goodness and truth of heart and mind we have inherited in Christ Jesus – and from witnessing the utter compromise of John’s heart for truth over his head to be popular and king-pin – we can only stay close to God and ask that we be given the strength and courage and resilience to live out our lives without compromise the best we can so that right and loving thinking – will bring right and loving action – bringing right and loving results in our living our God’s purpose and plan for the world and our place in it.

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