

Mark 6.14-29, 2 Sam 6.1-5, 12b-19, Ephesians 1.3-14.
(5th Sunday after Trinity: 11th July 2015, 10:00 a.m.)

May the words of my mouth, and the contemplations of my heart, always be acceptable in your eyes, O Lord my rock and my redeemer.

‘...for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man...’ (v.20)

This story of John the Baptist is a bit like something out of *Game of Thrones* come to think of it, now the most popular TV show on the planet. It combines titivation, licentiousness, vengeance, grotesque violence and a jolly good multi-faceted story to keep us all engaged. I’m sure that if Mark’s gospel was being told for the very first time with the aid of similarly stunning actors, locations, costumes & set-designs as the Westeros Saga, with all the most up-to-date special effects, computer graphics and motion-capture technology, folk would be equally gripped by this portion of the N.T.

But we’ve heard the story many times now, and familiarity does not help – we must revisit these scenes for ourselves, think about how they’ve been placed, and use our imaginations. Both Matthew and Mark put the murder of John the Baptist next to the feeding of the 5,000, the rule of Jesus juxtaposed with the rule of Caesar. John’s beheading is the only section in Mark’s gospel which is not specifically about Jesus, but is narrated because what happens to John points to the one who follows him – as did the earlier section about John at the beginning of the gospel. John’s death foreshadows that of Jesus.

There are even similarities in the stories, since both John and Jesus are put to death by political rulers who recognise their goodness, but who weakly give in to pressure. But perhaps Mark also intends his readers to see the contrast between John, who is buried and about whom only rumours of resurrection circulate, and Jesus, who is buried but then witnessed as raised from the dead by many.

Herod displays an ambivalent attitude towards John; knowing him to be a **righteous and holy man...** (v.20) he nonetheless imprisons him - just like Pilate recognising Jesus’ innocence but handing him over to be crucified. Herod likes to listen to John, but is also ‘**greatly perplexed**’ by what John says to him. It’s as though Herod recognises the truth – as though he knows in his heart of hearts that the word about repentance that John preaches is the truth, that he loves this truth and loves to hear it - but who in the end can’t quite bring himself to pledge allegiance to that truth.

Instead, he relishes the power and authority he gets to wield as he holds court, the puppet ruler of Galilee, serving Rome and reliant on it’s military prowess. Imagine the scene: they’ve all had a good supper with plenty to eat and drink; he and his cronies witness his step-daughter dancing before them – Lord knows what they’ve been thinking as the young nubile does so. But then, in his desire to show off to her and to them he is foolish enough to make a rash promise. Herodias seizes the opportunity to influence her daughter and the corrupted King is shocked at her request, aggrieved to be forced into the position of having to execute the man he both fears and secretly admires.

Such are the wages of sin – I expect we’ve all been in situations where we’ve been obliged to choose between the propagation of a lie, and the truth we know so well that lies behind it. I know I have – I know that I’ve been in situations where what seemed at first like a relatively minor crime slowly got bigger and bigger, and more and more serious, until it seemed to assume such gigantic proportions I could no longer bear it.

I’m thinking of the time when as a child I stole something from a sweet shop on the way home from school, when my mum and the shopkeeper weren’t looking. As we walked back to our house I felt more and more wretched, until my mum asked me why I was looking so miserable. I too was ‘[greatly perplexed](#)’, until eventually I could stand it no more and out came the truth. To my intense discomfort, she marched me back to the shop to make a red-faced apology ...but, with the benefit of hindsight, even this was better than the shame I’d felt walking home with my ill-gotten gains.

It’s life experiences like this that have made me think long and hard about concepts like original sin – and the symbolic truths found in ancient scripture, that some are content to write off as nonsense, or creation mythology, but that actually point towards deep truth about our human condition; that we have all sinned against God and our neighbour, ‘in thought and word and deed, through negligence, weakness and our own deliberate fault’, that no-one is perfect, not even the Queen or the Archbishop of Canterbury. What brings us to salvation is our preparedness to admit it to ourselves, to

confess it to God, to truly repent, as both the Baptist and Jesus urged us to do.

I’m very grateful to my mother for making me face up to the truth. Perhaps if Herod had had a mum like mine he’d have been able to think and act differently. But Herod’s lies became so big that even though he knew in his heart of hearts what the truth was, he couldn’t bring himself to do the right thing. Situations like this are so often the cause of much suffering and sadness.

But we must not be dismayed, because it is our Christian belief that whatever the gravity of our offence, whether we’ve allowed something dishonest to happen that has indirectly been to our benefit, or if we’ve committed the most grievous or heinous of crimes, there is *nothing*, and I do mean nothing, we can do that is beyond the capacity of our God to forgive. As Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians,

[⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us.](#)

Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave his life as a sacrifice for all of our sins, all we have to do is turn to Him in true penitence and faith and ask for his mercy – and it will be granted.

Spoken in the name of.....

Mark 6.14-29 The Death of John the Baptist

14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus* name had become known. Some were* saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.'¹⁵ But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.'¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod* had married her.¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not,²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was **greatly perplexed;*** and yet he liked to listen to him.²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.²² When his daughter Herodias* came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.'²³ And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.'²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.'²⁵ Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'²⁶ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring

John's* head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.²⁹ When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Amos 7.7-15

7 This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand.⁸ And the Lord said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A plumb-line.' Then the Lord said, 'See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by;⁹ the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.'

10 Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, 'Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words.¹¹ For thus Amos has said, "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land." '

¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, 'O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there;¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.'

14 Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am* no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am* a herdsman, and a

dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."

Psalm 85: 8-13

- ⁸ Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.*
- ⁹ Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- ¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
- ¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
- ¹² The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
- ¹³ Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Ephesians 1.3-14. Spiritual Blessings in Christ

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ* before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood,

the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,* having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this* is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

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