

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 6th Sunday after Trinity

11th July 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It was an unspeakable act. The act of a weak bully. It has fascinated artists, musicians and authors, competing to see how gruesome they can make the description of the scene. John the Baptist's head on a platter.

Our Gospel passage is a study in human weakness - one might say, human reality. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great who attempted to kill Jesus at birth, has been given authority to rule in Galilee by the occupying forces of imperial Rome. He has a semblance of power, but is in practice despised as a puppet king under Roman rule. Mark's portrayal of Herod shows someone in public life apt to make promises on which they cannot deliver, relying on bravado to see them through.

Herod has married his brother's wife. This was prohibited under the Law, and John has called it out as an illegal act. Herod then finds himself conflicted. Herodias is livid with John for causing her shame (just about the worst that could befall anyone in that society) and wants him dead. Herod, deep down, knows John is right and finds his truth-telling somehow fascinating. Herodias has brought her daughter Salome into the household, an attractive young woman, and Herod at the end of a drunken evening will give her more or less anything if

she will dance for him. Herodias pounces on the opportunity, Herod is trapped by his weak bravado, and like a Greek tragedy the scene can only end one way. It is all too like the depressing scene in a garden with a snake where everyone tried to say it was someone else's fault.

Herod's weakness is further exposed when Mark writes that 'out of regard for his oaths and for the guests' he did not want to refuse his stepdaughter's outrageous request. He could have said, 'Don't be silly; ask for something appropriate'. We are left wondering if the real reason might not have been more banal: that he was afraid of losing face with Herodias, whom he would have to confront after the guests had gone, desperate for her affections and those of her daughter. Later in the Gospel, Mark will portray Pilate similarly caught between finding no guilt in Jesus yet 'wishing to satisfy the crowd'. Weakness in power. The opposite of what Paul identified in Jesus: power in weakness.

There is something else about this story which, in order to understand it, we need to know what comes before and afterwards. Two weeks ago we saw how Mark interposed one story within another, when the healing of Jairus's daughter was interrupted by the woman taking hold of Jesus's clothes seeking a cure for her illness. Mark uses the same narrative technique here. In the passage that comes immediately before today's reading, Jesus sends out the Twelve to proclaim repentance, cast out demons and cure the sick. 'King Herod heard of it,' we are told. Between the sending out of the Twelve and their triumphant return, Mark interposes this story of the death of John the Baptist. Just as the disciples are discovering the power of Jesus's teaching, in the midst of all the signs and wonders he is showing the crowds, Mark warns of the cost of

discipleship, that telling truth to power can come at a terrible price. It's a glimpse of how the story of Jesus will end. And John is, in practice, the first Christian martyr, dying for his witness to Christ even before Jesus's death.

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Amos was faced with the same sort of decision, realising that something unpopular must be named to those in power (his prediction of the fall of the ruling dynasty). Yet he takes his stand, regardless of the cost. The reward for this kind of witness is that it places people within the very life of God that Jesus described, to which Paul in turn refers in his Letter to the church at Ephesus. The assurance that associating with Jesus has other consequences too, painted on a larger canvas. The assurance that the life of God is unstoppable, as the resurrection of Jesus has revealed.

John's death, in Matthew's account, has a marked effect on Jesus when he is told about it. He withdraws 'to a deserted place by himself'¹. The news can only have sharpened his understanding of what must lie ahead, as he continues to follow the vocation he knows to be his, the vocation first revealed to him at his baptism by John². He follows it all the way to Gethsemane and beyond: 'Father, ... not what I want, but what you want'³.

Vocation was very much the theme last Sunday, when representatives from our Diocese gathered in Milan for the ordination of four new priests, including our Curate Roxana. Bishop David Hamid spoke of the vocation of a priest in terms of a bridge. As Christ, the Great High Priest, is the bridge between heaven and earth, so priests in the Church are called to be bridges for people's prayer and

¹ Matthew 14.13

² Mark 1.9-11

³ Mark 14.36

offering, bridges of reconciliation in the community and bridges out into the world.

There is something about the call of this Gospel on our lives that is compelling. Not only for those who discern a specific call to serve as priests or deacons, but for every single member of the Church. (Some denominations refer to this in terms of the 'priesthood of all believers'.) In each circumstance we encounter, the question asked of us is this: 'What does the Gospel require of me here, and now?' It may be being the first to say sorry when there has been an argument. Becoming agents of reconciliation - at home, at work, among friends or strangers. It may be being the one who steps in to help when everyone else feels helpless. Becoming the leaven in the bread. Influencing how something turns out, for better or worse. That's vocation. It's about call and response.

Or we can be like Herod. Too weak to stand up to evil and nastiness. Too concerned for our own comfort to disturb the status quo. Too preoccupied with ourselves to find time to be kind to others. Often, it's the little things that matter to other people. We know that, for they matter to us too.

When John sent a message to Jesus from prison, asking if he was the one who was to come, Jesus sent a message back: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them'⁴. What a beautiful reply, even if it didn't answer John's question.

⁴ Matthew 11.4-5

What would people say of us that they heard and saw? Is it possible that they might say: 'I don't know why she goes to church, but I do know I always feel better for seeing her'; 'I don't know what makes him cross the city on a Sunday to go to that service, but I do know that when I was in hospital he was the one who showed up'. 'I don't know why she bothers with religion but I do know that when my colleague was being bullied in the workplace, she was the one who stood up for her and brought about change.' 'I don't know why he does all that churchgoing, but I do know that he is passionate about human rights.' Agents of reconciliation. Leaven in the bread.

John died because a weak bully couldn't bring himself to stand up to nastiness and evil when it was in front of him. Within a short time, the same thing happened to Jesus. What are we going to do about it?

Amen.