

Sermon. *Proper 10 Year B.* Charlbury 9.45am 14 July 2024
Mark 6:14-29.

It's a bit much on a Sunday morning to be faced with a story like that. Though it does have the sort of things in it that would make the Sunday papers. You could be sure that if there was a story about the king watching some rather sexy dancing and then beheading a key respected religious figure as a reward for services rendered, it would make the front pages. Or salacious gossip about relationships in the royal household. Or a story about a political leader making public declarations and then shooting themselves in the foot. Some things never change, do they?

Just think about the dilemmas Herod is facing. As Mark tells it, Herod is at odds with his wife over John the Baptist, and at odds with John the Baptist over his wife. He wants to appear to be a generous and trustworthy leader among Galilean Society but is troubled and compromised by his daughter's request for John's execution. His relationship with John makes him feel fearful, perplexed, angry and protective all at the same time. He's conscious of how other people will see him and what that means for his place and stature in this society, which was tenuous at best. Although he was sometimes referred to as King, he was only a tetrach, a minor ruler. He is insecure, and while John's words had really rattled him, he finds them strangely compelling. But he never quite gets it, and is just as capable as the rest of his bloodthirsty family of cutting life short on a whim.

You might feel a little bit sorry for Herod, for about one nano second. He's a weak man, caught in a web of tangled emotions and conflicting forces. He wants to please everybody but can't. Decision making in that kind of situation usually means your head is on the block, one way or another. In Herod's case, ironically, it was John the Baptist who lost his head to save Herod's reputation.

There's usually some hope in the Gospel, but it's hard to find it in today's story. It says very little about Jesus, except that people couldn't work out how a Galilean teacher came to have such miraculous power. Who was this man? That's the question, and the only answer they can come up with is John the Baptist resurrected but with more power, which frankly seems very unlikely, but the thought haunted Herod all the same. No wonder he was jittery.

Mark's Gospel tells the story of Jesus with breathtaking pace. We speed through the healings, miracles, and pithy stories that fire the crowd's imagination. Jesus heals lepers, paralytics, the deaf, the blind, the

possessed, he stills a storm and even raises a child from death to life. Then it's almost as if we come to a screeching halt as Jesus is rejected in his home town (as we heard last week), and there seems to be this pause in his ministry while he sends out his 12 disciples on a mission instead. And while we wait for their return, we are told this story about Herod, which appears to have very little to do with Jesus or the good news of the kingdom at all. Coming as it does in the middle of all the exciting stuff that Jesus is doing, you wonder why Mark has paused his fast moving story of Jesus to tell us this one in great detail. It seems to add little to the good news of the kingdom of God. So what's the point?

It's almost as if the complex mess of human life and death interrupts the flow of the kingdom of God, and for a moment obscures the hints Mark is giving about who Jesus really is. We know very well for ourselves how hope and faith can be eclipsed by all that's going on around us, at least for a while. It must be impossibly hard to keep hope and faith alive if you're in Gaza, or Ukraine, or have suffered the awful tragedy of having members of your family murdered, as John Hunt and others have this past week. There are no easy answers, just the reality of how it is.

But Mark tells the story of John the Baptist's imprisonment and death here for a specific reason. We're meant to see a link between this story and Jesus' own passion and death. Mark's stories of John's death at the command of Herod Antipas, and Jesus' death by order of Pontius Pilate have a lot in common. Both rulers look favourably upon their captives, who are prominent religious figures. Each ruler wants to spare the life of his prisoner. Both care more about pleasing their constituencies than exercising justice. Both act against their "better judgment" and condemn innocent men. Finally, both of the victims' bodies are recovered by disciples and laid in tombs.

We're only on Chapter 6, but Mark is already preparing his readers for what Jesus is going to do on the cross and in the empty tomb. Even through his death, John the Baptist is pointing to Jesus as the one more powerful than he was. John wouldn't be able to do very much about death, except die proclaiming the truth and remaining faithful to God. But Jesus could, and would. Death breaks in, but life wins out. Maybe the truth Mark conveys in his Gospel is that it is the kingdom of God that breaks in to interrupt the flow of the human stuff that is happening all the time, widening our horizons, helping us to see the bigger picture of what God is doing, offering a different perspective, a transformed life. The light of Christ shines through the mess, heralding the arrival of the kingdom of God, and it's unstoppable.

I remember one Christmas Eve, we actually had snow on the ground, and at the Children's Carol service I told them a bit of the Narnia story, you know that bit where it's always winter but never Christmas, and I speculated that that meant no presents of course. One boy's hand shot up and he shouted out with supreme confidence, "Well, it's Christmas Eve, you can't stop it now!" Isn't it interesting how children are more open to the spiritual realities than adults? Perhaps we have too much baggage and, like Herod, various concerns cloud our vision and affect our choices. There may well be times when we are compromised by our choices and circumstances, when we know the right thing to do but give in to another influence, when we can't quite seem to accept God's call on our lives, but can't ignore it either. Or maybe we are in a really difficult, dark place and can't see the way forward. But the hopeful thing here that this story is not the end of the story and we, unlike Herod, are not left to languish but are drawn on into Christ's story of compassion, forgiveness and redemption. Read *on!* At the end of this episode about Herod, Mark picks up the story of Jesus once more, and we find him taking his returning missionary disciples off somewhere quiet for some much needed time out, but he ends up feeding 5000 people instead. And so the kingdom of God goes on breaking in at unexpected moments, in unexpected ways. Christ *has* died, Christ *is* risen. Nothing can stop him now. It's why the Gospel is good news, it's why we dare to hope, even in the middle of all that's going on around us, and why it helps to refocus prayerfully on Christ.

Being followers of Jesus, and becoming a more Christ-like church, means constantly learning to see things from a different perspective and with God's agenda in mind. If you need a reminder what God's agenda is, read the Magnificat, or the Beatitudes, or better still one of the Gospels from start to finish. Ponder and pray. Politics, economics, conflict, the environment, poverty, health care, how people are housed and treated, immigration, what a living wage really means, our relationships, mental health and so on - it all becomes the work place for the Kingdom of God to break through, for moments of unstoppable grace and glory, love and forgiveness, hope and faith, redemption and life. Because Jesus *has* redeemed us, the kingdom of God *has* begun, and we *have* a life with which to make a difference, and be different. So may God give us courage to be faithful through all that life throws in our path, to trust in his loving purposes for us and all creation. (And may God bless the England team in Berlin this evening....) Amen.

Judy French