

John the Baptist was a righteous and holy man.  
He preached the commands of God without fear or favour.  
He was faithful in his prophetic calling even in the face  
Of murderous opposition,  
And he gave his life in faithfulness to his Lord.  
But today I'm not proclaiming the Good News about John the Baptist.  
Although he was a *righteous* and *holy* man  
Who preached the word of God faith faithfully  
He was not and is not our *saviour*.  
And that is because in the end we need not someone  
Who will tell us what to do,  
But someone who will ransom our souls from sin and death.  
So today we will hear God's word about John  
As a *preparation* for us  
To acknowledge our own sin and weakness  
And to turn to God to receive the *ransom for our souls*  
That comes with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's get into the text. Here's how it begins: **King Herod heard of it,**  
First of all, which King Herod?

This was Herod Antipas, a client king of the Romans,  
And one of the many sons of Herod the Great.  
Our Herod was half-uncle to Herodias, his wife,  
Who had been the wife of his half-brother, Herod Philip.  
It's enough to say that the Herod clan was incestuous, adulterous,  
And murderous, and that you wouldn't last long as a Herod  
Without having your wits about you.

Now, again, our text begins: **King Herod heard of it,**  
What is the 'it' that he hear about?

Well, just before our reading we hear these words: **So [the twelve] went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.**

So: the context is the mission of the twelve  
And the deeds they were doing in Jesus' name.  
In fact, right after our reading we hear about the report of the twelve  
As they come back and tell Jesus how their mission went.  
So: the narrative of the mission of the twelve  
Has the narrative of the death of John the Baptist right in the middle.

Let's keep this in mind as we begin to hear the backstory  
About what happened to the great forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist.  
Again, let's listen: **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.’ But others said, ‘It is Elijah.’ And others said, ‘It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’ But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’**

So: John is already dead at this stage of the Gospel,  
And, when Herod hears about Jesus and the ministry done in his name,  
He comes to the conclusion that John has been raised.

Now, this is not a normal conclusion to come to,  
Even for someone who might be open to the possibility  
Of a resurrection from the dead.

It’s a kind of Shakespearian haunting of a man  
Who knows he has done wrong and can’t escape.

Although St Mark doesn’t tell us explicitly

That a guilty conscience is at work,

He does fill us in as to what happened to John on Herod’s watch.

This is what we read: **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. For John had been telling Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’**

We’ve heard already that the Herod clan

Were an incestuous and adulterous bunch,

And now we hear that John,

Who came proclaiming a message of repentance in preparation

For the coming of the Messiah,

Was not a mouse but a lion.

We know that John was willing to tell people straight

About how they should live.

At the beginning of the Gospel, we read these words: **John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** Mark 1:4

John, we know, could spell out what repentance looks like,

Including telling *everyday people* about the necessity to share

And to act justly in their callings,

But now we hear that he was willing to speak

Not only to ordinary people, but to those in power, *even to King Herod,*

And not simply about how he should *reign* justly,

But how he should repent of his *sexual behaviour*.

Now: if you want to make an enemy of someone

Tell them the truth when it comes to their sexual sin.

And this is what happens to John, he makes an enemy. Listen: **And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 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.**

In my opinion it’s worth considering the different strategies

Men and women employ when it comes to sexual relations:

Sin is an equal opportunity employer,  
But it seems to me that men and women  
Sin in different ways in sexual matters – I think it plays out in the reading.  
In our reading its Herodias – Herod's niece-wife –  
Who wants John dead, while Herod wants to protect him.  
We get the picture that Herod knows that what John says is true,  
And we get the picture that Herod knows John is the real deal:  
John hasn't shut up because he's in prison,  
But he goes on speaking God's word even to Herod.  
But Herod, as impressed as he is, can't bring himself to repent:  
He's weak, and his niece-wife knows that he's weak  
And she bides her time to take down John,  
Who has made himself her enemy by speaking God's word.

She bides her time, and then we read this: **But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 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.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.'**

Do you think men and woman were at this party, or only men?

The clues in the text suggest only men,  
Not just because of who is listed as being invited:  
Government officials, military men, and the local tycoons,  
But also because Herod's own wife evidently *isn't there*:  
We learn that her daughter has to go out to see her.

OK: so evidently an all-male party.

What do you think the daughter's dance was like,  
And how much do you think Herod had had to drink,  
That led him to make his promise with an oath?

Has it ever happened in history that women  
Have presented themselves to men to get what *they* want,  
And that men have made extravagant promises to women  
To get what *they* want?

Well, we're dealing with the Herod family snake pit here,  
And the girl knows the ropes, and she knows who pulls the strings,  
So, after she hears her uncle-father's promise, she goes to her mum.

This is what we read: **She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' 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.'**

Notice the detail that the girl adds:

The head on a platter: this is not to be an out of the way killing,  
But one that will be seen and reported and remembered:  
Tell the king what to do, especially in his sex life,  
And this is what will happen to you.

Now, Herod, in his weakness, is cornered.

This is what we read: **The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.**

His evident drunken lust may have led him to make his promise,

But now evident desperation to hold on to power

And to be seen to be in charge - not to flip flop in front of the heavies-

Leads him from incestuous adultery into murder:

**Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl.**

**Then the girl gave it to her mother.**

What a party, and what a wonderful giving of gifts!

**When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.**

And that's the narrative about John and his death,

The longest sustained narrative in the Gospel

That does not have Jesus himself as the focus.

It ends with the body of the great prophet, John, being entombed.

John was a righteous and holy man,

He had done his job: he had proclaimed God's word.

But in the end, he is dead, and no one is saved.

And that is because although John

Spoke God's commands with boldness,

*Hearing what we ought to do* can't turn us from our sins,

And can't, in the end, bring us to reconciliation with God,

And to a way of life marked by God's righteousness and holiness.

John was *preparing the way* for the one who came

Not simply to tell us what to do, but to lay down his life for us.

This is what Jesus himself will say later in the Gospel: **For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.** Mark 10:45

We are made of the same stuff as the Herod clan,

We are naturally weak and self-serving,

And when we hear God's law, we want to silence it.

But Jesus comes not to condemn, but to bring healing and salvation.

So, let's receive even the hard word of God's law as a preparation:

A preparation for the ministry of Jesus

Who serves us with his forgiveness,

And through his word of forgiveness gives us his Holy Spirit,

So that we may be transformed as people

Who rejoice in the truth,

And who have God's righteousness and holiness shape our lives

As we grow in love for one another.

In Jesus' name. Amen!