

11/07/2021 Mark 6:14-29 Pastor Fraser Pearce

Adultery, incest, debauchery, political scheming  
Rash vows, murder.  
And the macabre treatment of a dismembered body.  
These are themes of today's narrative from Mark's Gospel  
In fact *the only sustained narrative in Mark*,  
That is not directly about Jesus.  
So what is it doing in the bible?  
And why are we hearing it today, in church?

One way that we'll receive this narrative today,  
Is to think of it in terms of *contrast*.  
What we have is shadow and darkness  
To the clear figure and light of Jesus,  
Who came not to play power games with us,  
But to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for us.

Today, from the Gospel, I'm proclaiming the good news  
That Jesus does not come into our lives to give us a bad conscience,  
Or to condemn us.  
He comes to bring his light to us, and to free us  
So that, being loved by God, and having a good conscience,  
We may be free to love each other

This is how today's reading begins

**King Herod heard of it,**

What did he hear of?

The ministry of the twelve sent out by Jesus.

In fact today's reading is wedged between the accounts  
Of Jesus sending out the twelve, and their return to Jesus

**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.'**

At the heart of the Gospels is the question of Jesus' identity:

Not simply questions about what he says or does, *but who he is*.

And, as we hear, there is confusion, there is darkness, not light.

Herod has his own confession of who Jesus' is:

**'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'**

Of course, this is not the case,

But we are about to hear the back story, helping us understand

Why Herod makes this confession.

The most simple interpretation, it seems to me,

Is that it is the confession of a *guilty conscience*.

As if Herod believes Jesus is John's ghost

Accusingly come to haunt him from the grave.

It's worth pausing here and noting a pint of contrast,  
Later in the Gospel we hear the same sort of language  
That is used in today's reading; so, this is from Mark 8:

**Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'**

Against the confusion of what people say,  
Is the clear confession of Peter, not coming from a guilty conscience,  
But as a gift from the Father in heaven: Jesus is the Messiah

Now as it happens, Peter, and the rest of the disciples  
Have to learn what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah.  
So, after foretelling his suffering and death for the third time  
To his disciples, Jesus gives them this teaching in Mark 10:

**'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'**

This is who Jesus is, who the Messiah is.  
This is the light, but today's reading gives us the shadow:  
The false confession of Christ  
Coming out of the mouth of a tyrant  
From the snake pit of human power struggles.

This is how the narrative goes on: **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.'**

OK, some explanation is in order here.

This Herod is not the same one mentioned

In the stories about Jesus' infancy: It's not the same one who ordered the Massacre of the little boys in Bethlehem, for instance.

That Herod was the father, this one, Herod Antipas, is his Son.

Now trying to unpack the Herod family saga

Is like trying to explain the plot of a particularly nasty soap opera.

Suffice to say that today's Herod had married his half niece,

Who herself had been married to his half brother

Who was also her half uncle.

Herodias and Herod Antipas had, we understand, first

Abandoned their own spouses, then lived together in open adultery,

And then tied the knot of their new relationship.

The whole Herod clan all held power as clients of the Roman empire

And they all jockeyed for recognition of royal status.

And they were willing to do what it takes to gain and hold on to power.

Hopefully you get the rough idea.

Now Herod had John arrested at the instigation of his half-niece, his wife, Herodias, because John had spoken truth to power:

In particular, he had clearly spoken about the sexual sin of Herod and Herodias.

In case we think that John landed in prison

Because he was too tough with the law,

We are going to hear later in the Gospel that John's teaching

Was the same as Jesus': this is what Jesus says: **Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.** Mark 10

A neat description of the relationship of Herod and Herodias.

Now our text goes on: **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. But an opportunity came...**

This narrative invites us to consider the different sexual strategies

That men and women employ to maintain power over each other.

John's preaching is a threat to Herodias, who would lose her position

If Herod acted on John's preaching.

Herod evidently knows that John is authentic, and that what he is saying is true,

But he evidently can't give up Herodias, either.

There seems to be a stalemate going on, until there's an opportunity

For Herodias to act: **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.'**

OK, here's the scene: it's a birthday party for Herod

All of men of Herod's local power base are present

Just the men, evidently (Herodias is not there, after all).

But Herod's daughter, that is, we understand, his great niece,

Comes in to dance before the men.

Now the evidence is that she's pubescent, the word 'girl' that's used here

Is the same word used for the girl who Jesus raises to life

Who was said to be 12 years old.

So, this pubescent girl dances before a group of men at a birthday party

And the birthday boy then makes an extravagant promise

To give the girl whatever she wants.

What do you think is going on here?

In what circumstances do evidently inebriated powerful men

Make big promises to share their wealth with girls?

Are there free lunches in this world?

What's more, is the girl there accidentally?

Or has someone, who knows what Herod is like, put her up to this?

Well, listen to how the narrative goes on: **She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?'**

There it is: the mother is behind this, she has used her daughter as bait

And she has caught her prey: she knows exactly what she wants:

**[Herodias] replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.'**

We could at this stage think the girl is only a pawn in this game.

But pay attention to the detail that follows: **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.'**

The apple has not fallen far from the tree: the daughter is like the mother...

The girl *rushes* to her task, and she adds the touch of the platter:

At this birthday banquet she wants to be served *John's severed head*.

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

He'd given his word in front of his local powerbase.

He couldn't go back without weakening his position

So he does what is morally abhorrent, but politically expedient:

**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.**

John is beheaded: and then there is a macabre sequence of silver service:

The head on a platter, from the guard to the girl,

From the girl to her mother.

God's word is silenced, or so it seems.

The voice of conscience is silenced, or so it seems.

And the narrative reaches its conclusion: **When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.**

At least John's disciples are with him in death

And attend to his body with reverence

A contrast to Jesus' won disciples, who are not there to attend to Jesus in death.

Dear brothers and sisters

All of us are naturally like Herod, like Herodias.

And like the girl in the narrative, we are naturally quick learners

When it comes to doing what it takes to get by in this world.

We are naturally willing to incur guilt if we can avoid the shame

Of weakness, of powerlessness.

If God's law *alone* were spoken to us,

We might find it compelling and attractive and true,

But it would give us only a guilty conscience.

It would give us a guilty conscience because we are made of flesh and blood,

And we, all of us, have broken God's holy and just commands.

But Jesus comes to us,

Indeed speaking a word that convicts us in our conscience of sin,

But that he speaks not to condemn us,

But to save us.

To save us from playing power games with each other,

To save us from a guilty conscience,

And to free us to serve God as we love each other.

Our Lord Jesus came to serve not to be served,

And to give his life as a ransom for many.

As a ransom for you.

His is the one who is not a shadowy figure of condemnation.

But a clear bearer of God's light.

The light that shines especially from his cross

The place of God's forgiveness and mercy.

And this Christ, and him crucified, is our proclamation,

It is *in him* that we have God's forgiveness extended to us

And God's love revealed to us.

May God keep us in this faith,

So that we may deal in mercy with each other,

Not treating our life together as a place for power,

But as the household that God has adopted us into,  
So that we may mature in Christian love for each other.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.