

Listening to & Speaking Truth

6 Pentecost B July 11, 2021 Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

Gospel: Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴King Herod heard of [the disciples' preaching,] for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; & for this reason these powers are at work in him." ¹⁵But others said, "It is Elijah." & others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." ¹⁷For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, & put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to marry your brother's wife." ¹⁹& Herodias had a grudge against John, & wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous & holy man, & he protected him. When Herod heard John, he was greatly perplexed; & yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers & officers & for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias came in & danced, she pleased Herod & his guests; & the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, & I will give it." ²³& he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." ²⁴She went out & said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" The mother replied, "The head of John the baptizer." ²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king & requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths & for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. The soldier went & beheaded John in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, & gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When John's disciples heard about it, they came & took his body, & laid it in a tomb.

Speaking Truth to Power

Few of us want to hear a hard truth, & perhaps fewer of us want to be the ones called to deliver one. Today's texts remind us that bearing God's word is risky business. Herod delivers John the baptizer's head on a platter to his wife, Herodias, to fulfill a promise he never should have made. Speaking truth to power can cost us our lives. Yet this is exactly what God calls & privileges us to do. God's prophets are ordinary people called to deliver an extraordinary message. We are sent from worship each week to proclaim God's in-breaking reign to all the powers that profess to rule this world. Still, beneath the apparent victory of power over truth, there is a hidden story

bursting through the seams of this tale. Yes, John the Baptist dies, but the integrity of his witness outshines all of Herod's corrupt court intrigues. Herod himself was drawn to John's preaching, & in the end, it is Herod's character that seems most tragic. Like Herod, we are each challenged to really listen to the challenging voice of God in our day & age, & to turn away from the lures & temptations that attempt to seduce us away from fidelity to God. Through us, God speaks words of peace, love, & faithfulness that challenge the world's violence, hatred, & treachery.

Mark 6:14-29

Mark tells in affecting details, the story of the death of John the Baptist. Verse 15 refers to the expectation of some Jews that Elijah or a definitive "prophet" would appear before the coming of the messiah. Mark, writing for a community that believes in Christ's resurrection, disparages the idea that also John had been raised from the dead (which Herod believes....& is present in Jesus). Josephus recorded that Herod Antipas (4 bce–39 ce) had imprisoned John for preaching against what the gospel calls Herod's adultery. Mark is foreshadowing the execution of Christ & warning the early Christian community that their fervent preaching may lead to martyrdom. For Mark, "Elijah" has come in the person of John the Baptist. The sex & violence hinted at in this narrative have led to its popularity with artists. For believing Christians it can be a picture of the lengths to which political injustice might go toward its self-protection & of the possibility that Christian faithfulness can lead to persecution. Christ, to whom John points & whom he prefigures, is both the one who preaches against injustice & the one whose head was on the platter for us. Our weekly meal contrasts with Herod's banquet.

Images in the Readings

The *head of John the Baptist on a platter* is a memorable image of this cruel & unjust world. However, as with most martyrs, John's voice has survived his decapitation, & centuries later we continue to hear his preaching. At this Sunday assembly, we approach a transformed platter, on which is not a dead man's head, but instead the bread of heaven for us. John's blood was poured out to make Herod look good, but Christ's blood gives us redemption. The report of John's death, Jesus' mentor (see Mark 1:9), was the end of innocence for Jesus' mission. Placing this account between the commission & the return of the twelve disciples (during the heart of the expansion of the Jesus movement), Mark relayed the story of John & Herod as a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death by the hands of a political, though sympathetic, figure.

The death of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-29)

Mark chose this opportunity, after Jesus sent out his disciples on their first formal mission, to report the death of John the Baptist. Using intercalation (i.e., the story “sandwich” method) once again, Mark placed this account between the commission & the return of the disciples to intimate its significance for the expansion of Jesus’ mission. At the beginning of the section, Mark offered transitional verses (verses 14-16) in order to express Herod’s views of the Jesus’ movement. Unlike others who thought that Jesus was a “prophet” (cf. 8:28), Herod thought that Jesus was a resurrected John (6:16). Herod’s assessment made a close link between the missions of Jesus & John. Not only was Jesus’ mission initiated only *after* John’s arrest, according to Mark, but Jesus’ continual activity was viewed by the “powers that be” as intimately associated with John’s. In Matthew, Herod feared *the people*, who considered John to be a prophet (Matthew 14:5). In Mark, Herod feared *John himself*, considering him a “righteous & holy man” (*dikaion kai hagion*). Herod, in Mark, “protected” John (6:20) until the request came for his head. In Matthew, Herod wanted him killed (Matthew 14:5). Even after his agreement to fulfill his oath, Herod “deeply grieved” in Mark’s account (6:26). This word, *perilupos* (“deeply grieved, sadness”), was used only here & to describe Jesus’ feelings in Gethsemane (14:34)! We should assume, in light of the description of Herod’s attitude towards John (in verse 20), that this was a sincere contrite feeling. Mark’s Herod was a sympathetic figure, whose public oath became his own demise.

- I. **Listening to Truth When You are in Power:** As a Parent/Leader/Supervisor/Boss how have you kept yourself truly open to inviting/hearing other perspectives – esp. from those with less power than you? What “blessing” have you given to them to “Speak Freely?” What were you taught about “talking back” that needs to change so you can hear the frustration or anger under an outburst like that & get a better understanding...no matter from whom?

Speaking Truth – esp. to Those in Power: What opinion/perspective/truth resides in your heart that is important to be shared YET you’re uncomfortable doing so? What if you knew God was depending on you to share thatto impact a situation....not that it HAS to change because of you but that you are called to share what you see/feel/know to be true?