

Sunday between 10th and 16th July [15]

Mark 6:14-29

The Gospel according to St Mark is, as we have already noted, a fast-paced biography of the life and work of Jesus. The whole book reads like an endless descriptive text infused with urgency. Yet in today's gospel reading we have something of a 'flashback' in the order of things. King Herod had heard of the wonders Jesus was doing and as his reputation spread, he was being compared to great prophets and preachers of the past. Some were going as far as to say he was those great prophets, come back from the dead, including St John the Baptist.

Mark takes a moment in his writing to let us know why this suggestion was particularly troubling to King Herod, because Herod himself had ordered and seen evidence of the death of John the Baptist. It was one thing for the crowd to wonder of Jesus was the prophet Elijah, a man from the distant history of the Jewish nation and a prophet of the faith, someone whose history tells of a taking up to heaven rather than a conventional death, such connections were not surprising between a new, radical preacher and Elijah.

But what of the suggestion that Jesus was John the Baptist, raised from the dead? That was altogether another matter! John and Jesus were contemporaries, John baptised Jesus at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and John was of interest to Herod personally, so he knew very well who John was and how he died. Herod was fascinated by John and a little scared of his power, so we can surmise that Herod was something of a superstitious man, perhaps, and this suggestion that John may be alive again worried him enough that it was known publicly. If it were not publicly known, Mark wouldn't have included it into his gospel. As an author who wrote with urgency, Mark was succinct and efficient with his narrative. He included nothing just as an aside, but rather every line was important. Why, then, does Mark include this description of the death of John the Baptist?

As a bare minimum, Mark saw the need to chronicle the fact that John the Baptist had been martyred during Jesus' lifetime. Jesus' ministry and John's prophetic voice were interrelated in ways not described well in Mark's gospel, perhaps, but certainly in the other gospels it becomes clear that both these men were working out God's mission in the world in parallel with one another even if their ministries were not really run side by side. John pointed to God's imminent intervention in the world, and after the baptism of Jesus, John recognised who in fact God had entrusted with that intervention. So it could be that Mark, simply wanted to ensure the end of John's story was told.

However, there could be more to it than that. The detailed description of Herod and his household gives some insight into the way in which the Jewish leadership operated. King Herod was allowed to remain in power in a limited way by the ruling Roman empire. This was a standard tactic of the invading Romans to keep the locals under a familiar structure so long as their rulers were obedient to Rome. Herod took full advantage of this and continued to enjoy the luxury of leadership despite having

no real power to work in any way other than the way best suited to the Romans. This compliance with Rome for personal gain moved Herod away from faithful, God-fearing living and the evidence is described as Herod breaking Jewish law in order to marry Herodias despite her already being married to his own brother. John the Baptist was vociferous on this matter, faithful to the law regardless of the consequences exercised by the powerful people against whom he spoke. Maybe Herod was somewhat envious of the courage John showed in the face of personal danger, or maybe he felt guilty about his departure from the law. Whatever the truth, John had an effect on Herod and despite his imprisonment, John was able to continue God's mission by preaching to Herod and his court.

John the Baptist met his end after Herod was put in a position where he had no choice but to order the execution if he wasn't to lose face in front of many important guests. Another insight into the lack of power Herod held, he was filled with pride and unable to make a choice based on his own preference, rather he had been manipulated by his wife and daughter.

Later, in the passion stories across the gospels, we come to know Herod as a powerless figurehead who despite being given the opportunity to deal with Jesus from Pilate, lacks the ability to decide either to release him or pronounce a sentence, and instead sends him back. Mark's description of Herod in relation to John the Baptist gives some insight into the motivations and behaviours which we see in his interaction with Jesus. There is much to learn about the leaders who condemned Jesus from this passage.

But what about us, what can we learn? From John the Baptist we are again faced with an example of what courage looks like when we live and speak not in our own strength, but in God's strength. Speaking truth to power is not easy, but it is Godly. Jesus sets the example for us, but before Jesus there was John and the prophets time and again discerning God's voice in a situation and speaking God's heart, thereby putting themselves at personal risk. We, too, are called at times to speak truth even when the truth is unpopular or risky. We can also learn from Herod, though. Herod was drawn to John's message and liked to listen to him, but he did not allow himself to be changed. We can sometimes find ourselves in a similar situation, where we open ourselves to hear other voices and opinions and may even be drawn to new ideas and approaches, but we can't quite allow ourselves to move our stance in any meaningful way.

Interacting with God through prayer, worship, reading and fellowship is going to cause us to change. Done right, and by all logic, it would be impossible not to be changed by such interactions. Yet all too often we resist and entrench rather than open ourselves to the possibilities. Let us then learn not only from John to be confident in God's strength, but also from the missed opportunities of King Herod and allow ourselves not just to hear the message of the Gospel, but also to be transformed by it.