

2 Samuel 6. 1-5, 12b-19

Mark 6. 14-29

After sitting with this grisly story of the beheading of John the Baptist for a few days, I began to wonder why Mark chose to include it, in such full and grim detail. This gospel of Mark, which is so often urgent and sparing with language, suddenly goes into a whole lot of detail of the political intrigue at this royal party – Herod’s birthday banquet. I began to feel that the detail of the political machinations and intrigue is actually a foreshadowing of what happens for Jesus in the account of the Passion.

One of the things that reading snippets of scripture each week keeps from us, is the narrative ark of so many parts of scripture. So it becomes difficult to know – why this story? And why do we have to hear *this* story? How can we say: *Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ?* I’m not quite sure I feel thankful about this.

Mark begins his Gospel in such an urgent way and the action gallops from one thing to another in a brief and rapid sequence:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days,

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

What’s interesting for Mark is that the trigger – the starting gun, if you like - for the beginning of Jesus’ ministry is the arrest of John the Baptist. It is as though Jesus says to himself – *John has been silenced. It’s time for me to stand up.*

And so we find ourselves today looking through a window into the world of the powerful who want John silenced. Here they are gathered for Herod’s birthday _ his courtiers and officers and the leaders of Galilee. The court nobility; the military officers who protect and enforce Herod’s illegitimate rule and the social and commercial leaders of Galilee. [picture]

If you are inclined to watch programs about the royal family you might have seen a series about Prince Phillip, screened soon after he died. – and the difficulty he had being taken seriously by the royal courtiers. Who was this poor orphan with a rather thin royal pedigree that Elizabeth has chosen? He’s not one of us. And they refused to recognise him and blocked and frustrated and looked down on him. And manipulated the situation, to suit their own elitist agendas.

So here in Herod's palace we see a similar intrigue. Herod is transfixed by John and is under his influence – and the courtiers fear the reforming influence of John and his message, it makes the military situation unstable and those with commercial interests also fear an unstable and unreliable king. Heaven forbid, we can't have a king with a moral compass.

And, it is more than likely that Herod's marriage to Herodias is an arranged marriage; a diplomatic alliance to bring two powerful families together – not a marriage out of lust – the dancing is a bit a distraction in this regard. This marriage to Herodias is the result of the courtiers sending away Herod's first wife, because that political alliance was seen now as redundant, and a new marriage alliance is entered into with the family of Herodias

Maybe I'm dim, but I always thought that the dancing Herodias was the daughter of Herod's wife. But, indeed, Herodias is Herod's wife. It is almost as if Herod doesn't know her. But his vows to her – ask me for whatever you wish – is a weakness toward this woman's influence. But she too is a pawn, like Herod is something of a pawn. She doesn't know what to ask for. So she goes and asks mother – it would seem who is the real power behind the throne. The niggling moral compass of John the Baptist must be removed – here is our chance. Immediately the soldier is despatched to enact the party trick: off with his head.

We are currently witnesses to a game of court intrigue which we are going to be subjected to for the next six months – and beyond. And while it doesn't directly involve us, our media will subject us to its machinations without let up; day and night. That is, of course, the looming US election. What concerns me about it all is the parallels to Germany between the two world wars. Hitler was a leader with a kind of irrational passion which enable him to whip the German populace to a frenzy. Likewise – in spite of the outrageous things he says and the ways he behaves - Trump seems to also have a strange hold over a large layer of the American population.

Hitler's appeal to the Germans was that they had been humiliated. The whole premise of Make America Great Again is – we have been humiliated; we are not what we once were – which is of course a deception. The ones who have impoverished such a large slice of the American population are the courtiers, the officers and the leaders. And the convicted felon, who will make America great again, has just had the way laid open for him to become a king in the pattern of Herod and Charles I, or Louis XIV or Hitler of Stalin or Putin. A reign of retribution. It is as though the rule of law has been suspended, in anticipation for the arrival of Trump and his courtiers into the White House again.

We might be saying to ourselves about the shenanigans in the US at this point: it doesn't interest me; it doesn't involve us; it's a soap opera on the other side of the world. But we will find ourselves involved somehow if it all unfolds in the way that seems likely now. The multiple military adventures of the 20th century which broke out on the other side of the world saw us caught up – saw Australia's sons and daughters drawn way, sent away to two appalling conflagrations in Europe, then Korea and Vietnam, and Iraq and Afghanistan. Wars between the courtiers and officers and leaders of opposing countries who postured to protect and expand their own interests.

Has it ever struck you that one of the most serious consequences of this war (WWI) is what Kirk calls 'the survival of the unfittest'? All those who have the courage to do so and are physically sound, are going off to be shot: those who survive are moral and physical

weeds – a fact which does not promise favourably for the next generation. CS Lewis writing about WWI

Mark Twain, who saw through the American charade wrote: God created war so that Americans would learn geography.

When rich people fight wars with one another, poor people are the ones to die. Jean Paul Sartre.

The way the contest is being portrayed to us is between two old men of very questionable cognitive and moral capacity and, admire or be incensed by them, they, like Herod, have behind them an array of courtiers and officers and leaders, with their own particular barrows to push and conflicts of interest. Given the events of this past week, both of these candidates now seem entirely ill-suited for the role they aspire to and should be disqualified, but they seem to be held in place by an array of unseen forces. And we might ask: where we will it end?

So many of our churches have honour boards in some place or other – discreetly placed or in great prominence: for God, King and Country. One of the questions which Sally Douglas brought out into the open in the Church as Salt, was the compact of the past between the church triumphant and the powerful of our society.

Our churches proclaimed Christ the King, but we had allegiance to another kind of reign on our honour boards. Displaying our compromised and conflicted loyalties for all to see. But could we see our convicted loyalties ourselves? Are we prepared, I wonder, to name the sins of the past in our reconsideration of what church is about; what church is for? And to what extent are we prepared to deconstruct those loyalties and allegiances to meet the challenge of our time?

The movement in Mark's Gospel from arrest to execution of John and then the same movement later for Jesus – from arrest to execution - is reminded that those who proclaim the reign of God will face resistance and persecution. Jesus is quite clear about that.

May God give us true hearts and courage as each day we face the divine question – choose this day whom you will serve – and continue to walk with the one who seeks reconciliation and peace for all.

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