

Pentecost 6
12/7/2009

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 6:1 – 19
Psalm 24
Ephesians 1:3 - 14
Mark 6:14 - 29

A beheaded prophet: murder as political parody

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

One of the unruffled secular assumptions of the day is that religion has nothing to do with politics, or - more insistently - that religion ought to have nothing to do with politics: the mantra of most letter writers to the Age. Indeed, only last week, to the unhelpful question posed to Age readers: 'Should politicians use religious language?' 83% answered in the negative. This divided world mentality may well be the most entrenched dogma of all - on the lips, let it be said, of those who utterly despise dogma.

The truth is, however, that once this fatal divorce is cemented - that politics is about the public realm and religion about the private - everybody suffers. For if religion is banished from the public square, or goes voluntarily into exile, leaving the individual and the state as the only actors in it, then there is nothing left to check the secular state's propensity to turn totalitarian.

So while a generalised notion of 'religion' might be confined to the realm of the private - recall the celebrated popular sentiment that 'religion is what a man does with his solitude' - the fact is that relegation to the realm of the private has never been endorsed by the gospel.

Of course, an insistence on the gospel's global compass now has to contend with an increasingly widespread outrage abroad that, whatever Christian faith may be, it can never be a candidate for public truth. Clive James, for one, says it all in his recent substantial book 'Cultural Amnesia':

'In its proper sphere, private life,' he writes, 'a religion can keep its teachings as pure and strict as it likes free to protect its own sources of spiritual nourishment against the fatal obligation to make them universally intelligible' (p490).

And then there is Carmel Lawrence's recent stunning pronouncement that

'there is a risk that religious reasoning not subject to the usual rational challenges may grow in significance' - a prejudice, it seems, that is no longer subject to convincing protest.

This surely has to be the real price we are paying today for religious fundamentalism, or at the very least, of adhering to the requirement of keeping personal beliefs and private passions out of the purported cool rationality of the public square, a curiously unreal account of how, in fact, the political process works.

In any case, securing this innocuous place for religion secures a further victory for the secular state, since it is the best way of effectively killing the church. By making the revelation of Jesus Christ a *religious* rather than a *world making* event, Christians are effectively silenced. How far have we moved in all this from today's Psalm: 'The *earth* is the Lord's and all that is in it' or of that picture of reality set out in today's Epistle of 'the gathering up of *all things* in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth'. Cultural Amnesia indeed!

Perhaps it all comes down to the outcome of living in a culture in which virtually everything has been reduced to individual choice, even while we try to come to terms with the fact that we live in ever expanding cities trying to cope with seemingly infinite choices.

Of course, the secular world has not forgotten that the word politics comes from the Greek word 'polis' meaning a city, and that politics is simply the art of 'fashioning the polis', increasingly problematic it seems, especially for the 'police'.

But the fact is that in its relegation of the Church to the private, today's prejudices increasingly choose to ignore that from beginning to end God is preoccupied in fixing up human cities.

Indeed, according to Old Testament experience, right at the beginning, the building of a city is understood to be the final and definitive mark of the fall – 'Come, says Adamic mankind, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth'. Then - delicious irony - the Lord came down to see! Hello! I can see your great tower, and your buckets and spades – way down there!

And then at the end, the divine counterpoint. Not a temple nor a church for a renewed habitation, but according to the seer, a holy city appears – 'a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.'

And in between, there are cities everywhere. Abraham, on the cusp of a new beginning, looked, we are told, for a city whose builder and maker is God. And then Israel in her city has to contend with alien cities on every hand, Babylon and the rest. Not surprisingly, Jesus' ministry is conducted by moving between cities in different regions. So the writer of Luke's gospel decides that it will be cities that will define his interpretation of theological reality, taking fourteen chapters to get Jesus to the city of God, Jerusalem and his end, and then finishing his account of the Acts of the Apostles by getting the gospel to the city of man, pagan Rome, Jerusalem's quintessential foil.

And now here, this morning, we are confronted by one of the most extreme intersections of what the world calls religion and politics in the dramatic narrative about a weak-willed Herod, about his treacherous wife Herodias, and his manipulable daughter, and about an unflinching John the Baptist.

The passage begins with a summary of the Apostles' ministry, where we are told that they had done their job well, even reaching high places, since the Galilean king was now aware of Jesus and his work. Then, too, the media, as always, had done its work comprehensively: 'people were saying', such that some said Jesus was John the Baptist, others that he was Elijah, yet others that another old prophet had returned.

These three prevailing opinions concerning the identity of Jesus each offer a different interpretation of his vocation. The last of the three identifying Jesus as a prophet 'just like any other' is harmless enough, since Mark has already revealed him to be 'a prophet without honour'. But it is quite another matter if he is Elijah, for Elijah was venerated as the expected prophet of the end time, bringing Yahweh's judgement on the world. The worst case, however, so far as Herod is concerned, is if Jesus really is 'John whom I executed' - for if John's mission has been brought back to life, then Herod knows that his power has conclusively been broken.

Herod clearly had experienced real ambivalence about John. The text is at pains to tell us that though Herod feared him, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, he liked to listen to him even to the point of protecting him. At any rate, Herod obviously has a bad conscience. Having already put John to death, he is alarmed at his possible reappearance.

So, what had the Baptist done?

He had entered the world of secular politics in the most confrontational way possible, and had done so on two counts. First, we need to understand that intermarriage was a matter of politics amongst royalty, fundamental to the building and consolidation of dynasties. Herod's first marriage to an Arabian princess achieved a diplomatic alliance with her father, the king of one of the strongest near Eastern kingdoms of the time. So a potentially explosive international incident was being triggered by the marriage's dissolution and by Herod's second marriage to Herodias. Moreover, revenge by his first father-in-law was a distinct possibility. Herod feared that, aided and abetted by John's preaching, a popular insurrection by the Jewish inhabitants joining forces with the army of the repudiated king was on the cards. In fact, later on that occurred, and Herod's forces were defeated. Not surprisingly, many Jews came to interpret this defeat as Herod's punishment for John's execution.

A second factor involved had to do with the relationship between political authority and the Jewish law. Some of the part-Jewish kings of the Herodian line conformed to the requirements of the Torah – the holiest of the scriptures - only when it was politically expedient to do so. John insisted, however, that to claim rule over the Jewish people is legitimate only when Jewish law is consistently being recognised. In his remarriage, Herod's divorce was clearly in violation of the law. Finally, Mark's portrayal of Herodian court intrigue gives an even sharper edge to it all. The guest list of his birthday banquet is revealing. It's not a bad lineup. His court nobles, his army officers, and the leading Galileans all get an invitation – an incestuous cabal involving governmental, military and commercial interests. This is simply but one down the ages of similar mutually beneficial liaisons.

Yet despite such a power bloc, it is a dancing girl who finally decides the fate of the Baptist. At the centre of it all stands Herod's oath to his new wife's daughter, stated twice for its less than compelling rationale. A similar fiction will in due course be repeated in the figure of Barabbas, and then of the crowd's excuse for Pilate's delivering of Jesus to his death.

Here, though, a human life is being bartered to save royal face. Herod trades the 'head' of the prophet to rescue the integrity of his own drunken oath, and to curry favour with his powerful guests.

So Mark's account of the death of John is hardly apolitical. It stands within the biblical tradition that pits arrogant kings against truth-telling prophets. But above all, John's death paves the way for Mark's supreme political parody – the trial and execution of the Royal Man by collaborative Jewish and Roman powers.

So Mark this morning wants to tell us this: that John's fate at the hands of the State anticipates in every detail Jesus' own bitter end; John's seizure and imprisonment, his execution, his burial in a tomb, and his implied resurrection - each will have its future, even more decisive, re-enactment.

Western culture has been shaped by texts like this, yet still the mantra persists - religion and politics don't mix!

So the next time someone says this in your hearing - and you can count on it - today equips you to offer them a bloody rejoinder: on a plate.
