

**Pentecost 7**  
**15/7/2012**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**2 Samuel 6:1 – 5, 12b – 19**

**Psalm 24**

**Ephesians 1:3 - 14**

**Mark 6:14 - 29**

Sermon preached by Rev Dr Morag Logan

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Now many people came in crowds to [John the Baptist], for they were greatly moved by his words. Herod, who feared that the great influence John had over the masses might put them into his power and enable him to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best to put him to death. In this way, he might prevent any mischief John might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late.

Accordingly John was sent as a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I already mentioned, and was put to death.

These are the words of Josephus about the death of John the Baptist – and isn't it a strikingly different, if rather more prosaic story. I find Mark's telling, in fact, rather puzzling. It takes some work to think through why it is that Mark tells this story, in this way. It is a racier version of the story, certainly – but I doubt that this telling is merely a descent to the style of tabloid journalism, in order to sell more gospels.

It is certainly not told in this way for its advanced gender analysis and roles – and I find the portrayals of the women a troubling aspect of this telling, which sharpens the question: why tell it in this way? The story falls into a portrayal of “the evil woman,” pulling the strings behind the scenes, in Herodias; and the woman as temptress, or seductress in its portrayal of Salome. I don't think that it is Mark's point that women are the source, or a particular cause of evil. The text has been used and interpreted this way, but don't think that this is Mark's point.

It is helpful to look at the text to see its point or points by analysing the characters in it. Unlike Josephus' narration, where John the Baptist himself is the major focus, unlike Josephus, Mark is not trying to focus our attention on the voice, character or message of John the Baptist. Here John is scarcely a character. The story starts with a spoiler – we know about the death of John before we hear the story, which does flatten out the character and dramatic potential. John does not speak, preach, argue or act – he is off scene throughout. Surprisingly, John is not the focus of the drama here.

Salome is beautiful, desirable, portrayed in an overtly sexual manner. She is a beautiful sexual object, almost bait, but also very much a bit part as she shuttles between the more powerful characters of Herod and Herodias. Salome has no power to act on her own, and she does not express her own mind, merely takes instruction and delivers messages.

Herodias – is very much the evil character here. She wants to kill John the Baptist because he opposes her, because he criticized Herod, and condemned their marriage. Like many other women biblically, she has plans and desires, but very little power. She is limited in her ability to act. Like Esther, like Jezebel she can only manipulate matters behind the scenes, act by using others, trapping and manoeuvring the powerful men to achieve her goals.

Herod – is the most interesting, and complex character in this story. He is a strangely attractive figure, not the all-powerful despot that Josephus shows. Herod here sees and understands something of the nature of John the Baptist. He sees that John is righteous and holy. He is perplexed, both alienated and attracted by John. He imprisons John. We are told in Mark that he imprisons him because of John's criticism of Herod's marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias.

This is a problem under Israelite law in this case because his brother happens to be still living – which puts this relationship into the category of forbidden, almost incestuous, a pattern which is repeated in many ways in Herod's story. Herod is obviously attracted to his wife's daughter, and in fact Herodias is Herod's niece as well, from another side of the family. Family trees in noble families in Israel/Palestine in the ANE can be complex to try to follow, and divorce and remarriage were common in the royal families as political alliances changed – but it is so much a stress in this story, that it is clear that Mark is making the point that the political power that John, and Jesus are standing against is an incestuous thing. So John is critical of Herod's marriage, and Herod has him imprisoned for this public criticism. Imprisons him, but likes to listen to him.

Herod, the seat of political power here, is shown to be profoundly limited – fearful, vacillating, making rash promises then finds himself limited by them, limited by his own sense of honour, wish to avoid being shamed in front of his guests.

The last character at play in this story – although standing outside it – is Jesus himself. The whole tale is told from the perspective of Jesus, and because of questions about his identity. Is this man Jesus Elijah returned? Or possibly John the Baptist resurrected? And this is the wider focus that, I think, points us to the real significance of this story. The question of resurrection is, I think, key here. We are being pointed forward in this story; the risk, the reality of death is central – the death of John in the past of this story, the death of Jesus hinted at in the story's future.

It is also key, I think that there are many similarities between Herod and Pilate. Both represent the political power of the time. Herod finds John attractive, he sees that he is righteous and holy – as Pilate does Jesus. Both act against their inclinations; both are trapped by forces of destruction; trapped by their own limitations, by their own understandings of their position, by their own systems.

In Mark's gospel, political power is despotic, is unjust, is incestuous. It will kill figures that stand against it, but it also is weak, at the mercy of other, nearly incomprehensible powers of evil and of darkness – the crowd in the crucifixion, Herodias in the story of John. There are forces of evil, of darkness, Mark is telling us, forces beyond all political power, and both of these will kill. This is the risk and the threat – to John the Baptist, to Jesus, to the disciples, to all those who are later disciples, to all those who stand up and speak against evil, injustice, offer critique of political power.

A sobering and dark story, one that needs to be told and to be heard, as this dark, sombre and dramatic tale is also the one great tale of hope. The crowd's impression, that Jesus is John come back to life, has a great truth within it. Herod can kill John, but not John's voice, not John's words; these can live on in others prepared to take up the same mantle. It points us to this, and to the greater mystery, that in Jesus and the story which unfolds in Mark's gospel of his life, death and resurrection, we are told that not only is the voice for life, for justice, against evil ultimately unkillable, so also is this particular speaker, Jesus. In the resurrection, the messenger, as well as his message of life, healing and hope are given eternal life, eternal expression, and therein lies our hope, the hope for all who face these same threats, the hope for our whole world.

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