

Sermon preached by Rev. Chris Moroney at the Healing Service at St. Andrew's Cathedral,
Sydney on Wednesday 31st January 2007. Reading Mark 6:14-29
Topic: "Learning from John the Baptist"

1 SPECULATION ABOUT JESUS

There are some people today who regard Jesus as a good teacher. They try to follow the golden rule of Jesus: do unto other as you would have them do to you.

Although some people twist even that around: do unto others what you think they are going to do to you to hurt you, only do it first.

Still others think that Jesus was a great prophet who taught what he knew about God.

But since then a greater prophet named Mohammed has come along and taught more up to date things about God. The latest prophet is the greater prophet.

Still others in the church regard the true Jesus as beyond our knowing, lost in the mists of time.

But there are still some people, many of them in the church, who think that the bible is very clear about Jesus: He is God's one and only son who came into the world to save sinners, to bridge the gap that we have all made between God and man.

What do you think about Jesus?

It is one of the most important questions that we will ever have to answer.

And our answer is a matter of life and death. His death in our place and our eternal life if we put our trust in him. But speculation about Jesus is nothing new. Here in Mark's gospel it is the main theme. People are divided in opinion about Jesus. Some are confused. All are amazed. Some are annoyed by him. Still others are learning to trust him with their lives.

For King Herod, the reputation of Jesus as this wonderful teacher and healer is unnerving. He has a guilty conscience. He is afraid that John the Baptist has come back from the dead and has resumed work.

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." [15] But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." [16] But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

This is very interesting of course to the bible reader. On the one hand it shows how close John the Baptist and Jesus were in their styles. These are tumultuous times. This is the Day of the Lord when these special things had been predicted. John the Baptist and Jesus were indeed both calling on people to repent, to come back to God, to be ready for the coming of the kingdom. The reference to Elijah is also a mark of recognition of the Old Testament being fulfilled.

In Malachi 4:5 there is a reference to another Elijah coming to lead up to the coming kingdom of God. John the Baptist was just that figure. Very much like Elijah, with his odd clothing, his always eating out, in the desert. He was totally God dependent, not beholden to any man or king. He spoke to the people of God the Word of God without fear or favour. And he was hated for it.

In Elijah's case he was met with the opposition of the King and Queen: Ahab and Jezebel. He even had to run away from them. It follows the same pattern in the way that John the Baptist is treated. Jesus, is not without honour, except in his own town. But prophets were never well received.

2 KING AND QUEEN

In the passage before us the King and Queen who mistreat the prophet are Herod Antipas and Herodias. The text makes it very clear that they had done the wrong thing. John the Baptist had made it clear. They should not have married, but they did want to take any notice of the man of God. They wanted to do things their own way, and live their lives in defiance of the word of God.

Herod actually liked to hear John. There was a sense in which he knew what he said made sense. He knew it was right. And yet, he could not bring himself to live by what he heard.

17] For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. [18] For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." [19] And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, [20] for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. Notice that they both lived as if they were above the law of God. They knew it but defied it. There are many people today who know what God requires of them, but they push God's ways to one side. They know what is right, but they do what is wrong. They called it a Sexual Revolution in the 1960's. The catch cry was Free Love, the action was illicit and uncontrolled sexual perversion. The good gift of God for married couples was turned into a hedonistic orgy in the name of progress. And we are still suffering from the consequences of such a denial of God's standards.

There are many who are fiercely antagonistic to the Word of God. And like the Queen in our story, Herodias, these people want to silence the preachers of God's word, through censorship and ridicule. There are others who may feel a slight twinge of conscience, but it does not bother them enough, to change their actions or to speak out in favour of keeping sex for marriage.

People say that you should let conscience be your guide, but if your conscience is so hardened by saying "no" most of the time, or your conscience has been informed by the modern media rather than the word of God, you have got no chance of living a godly life. Herod knew it was wrong, but he would not take a stand. Herodias knew it was wrong and her stand was one of murder.

Notice what our text tells us about John the Baptist, which again is very like Elijah.

[20] for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

a righteous and holy man

What a wonderful reputation. Just the right sort of reputation for a prophet. Remember what we read about Elijah in the book of James? James 5:16-18 (ESV)

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. [17] Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. [18] Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. Surely that is a great encouragement for us to be people of both righteousness and prayerfulness.

3 PARTY TRICKS

The main point of this whole passage is that the lot of the prophet, even the lot of the righteous person in an ungodly society is to suffer persecution. It is a test or an indicator of the level to which a society has stooped that it would treat a man of God in a bad way. Remember that John the Baptist is the forerunner of Jesus. Prepare the way of the Lord. Let people know that the Messiah is coming. Let them repent and get ready for the King in God's kingdom. But look what they have done to the messenger, the announcer: they have killed him in a most vicious and cruel manner. And it will be the same story with Jesus. Let's take some time to think about the process of the execution. For this is indeed a tragic story of the great dangers of party tricks.

[21] But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. [22] For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." [23] And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." [24] And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." [25] And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." [26] And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. [27] And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison

[28] and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.

Firstly, we see the great danger in having birthday parties that set out to impress other people. Herod calls in his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. They were pleased to come along, to curry favour with the king, to be seen by other important people and to make some important contacts. It is a matter of speculation, but I cannot help wondering if the King and his guests may have consumed alcohol which always reduces one's ability to think clearly and act wisely. The idea of having a party at which you drink alcohol with a view to getting drunk so that you do not even remember what happened is a very sad reflection on a society like ours which makes getting drunk a cultural norm.

The scriptures make it very clear that we should not get drunk at all.

Many of us will know the great tragedy that can come from a life devoted to the consumption of alcohol. Ephes. 5:18 (ESV) *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,* Many of us will also be able to testify to the wonderful power of God to free people from the addiction to alcohol and to seeing lives restored.

The **first** danger is that of trying to impress other people. The **second** danger is getting drunk.

The **third** danger is getting carried away with pornography. The entertainment industry of Herod's day was limited, but the main attractions were still the same as they are today. Herodias' daughter danced for the king and his guests. And you can be sure that it was not Scottish Dancing with straight arms and quick feet. The King is gazing upon his step daughter. He becomes infatuated with her. She is old enough to be his daughter!

He makes an outlandish promise in the heat of the moment. It is a knee jerk reaction. A whim of the emotions. He has become carried away with the moment. He promises her the earth, in front of his guests, the ones he wants to impress. His eyes are taking over from his brains.

Here we have a clear example of temptation that comes through the eyes, and deadens the brain, but affects the rest of the body in a way that can be all consuming. And our society is obsessed with physical attractiveness. We all need to exercise self control at this point, especially the men.

What are the fruits of the Spirit? Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

What do you think that Herodias had to drink that night?

Do you think that she who hated John the Baptism, just got carried away with the fun of the party. I would not be surprised to think that she remained very sober to take advantage of any situation that presented itself. Do you think she could have added more drink to her husband's glass than usual? Do you think that her daughter danced more provocatively than usual?

The daughter goes to her and asks the question. Herodias has the answer ready to go.

The king, the man who is in charge, the boss of the party, he hears the answer and is horrified. He knows it is wrong. He feels it in his bones. He knows it in his heart.

Yet look at what it says in verse 26

26] And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.

What an idiot! What a fool! What a wimp! What a tool of the Devil!

He gives in. And a righteous and godly man loses his life.

Friends, let us learn an important lesson here. If we know that God wants us to live his way let's do it. Even if we have started down a path of decision, and then realized that it is wrong, we must have the courage to back out, to call it off, to change our minds, to pull out. That is why cooling off periods are so important when people sign contracts or make big decisions. Sometimes slick salesmen can talk you into a special deal, and the next day you realize you can't afford the repayments. That's when you

wish there was a cooling off period. We must have the courage of our convictions, under God, to go back on our word, if we have made a mistake. At the end of the day, it is God whom we serve and honour, not our friends or even our family. If we live our lives trying to please others all the time we are in danger of not pleasing God some of the time.

Don't forget that through all of this tragic story there are echoes of what was to happen to Jesus.

Jesus came before Pontius Pilate, the Governor. He had the authority of the Romans Army behind him. But he still gave in and did what he knew to be the wrong thing, for the wrong reasons. In Mark 15:10 we read that Pilate knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered Jesus up to him. And in Mark 15:15 we read that Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd released for them Barabbas.

4 TRAGIC LESSONS

And so, we can see that there are some tragic lessons for us to learn from this very sad story.

Even with the coming of the Kingdom there is still evil in this world. God's people have suffered and will continue to suffer, until the return of Jesus in all his glory with all his angels. God is still in control. He is over and above all the kings and rulers of this world. He is still in charge of all the people who live as if they were indeed the masters of their own morality and destiny.

Even through the evil that is done to John the Baptist and eventually to Jesus, God is working his purposes out. And his purposes will not fail. God is redeeming and remaking this world and calling people to himself. WE usually put most of our attention on the miracles of Jesus as markers that he is the Messiah, God's anointed king bringing in the kingdom. But the tragic death of John the Baptist, the Elijah figure, is also a marker of the King Jesus, and the need for people to submit to him and find their salvation in him. While there are many lessons for life that we can learn from this story of the death of John the Baptist, the biggest lesson remains that it took place at a particular time and place, just before Jesus' ministry took off and reached its climax in his death and resurrection.

Nevertheless, the lessons also apply to us, if we are seeking to live as Christians in this world of sin and temptation. Firstly I want to be very clear that if there is anything in this story of deception and temptation that has touched on things that we have done in our lives, we must bring all those things to Jesus. No matter what we have done, no matter what we have become, Jesus can make us clean, and give us a fresh start.

He went to the cross because we are sinners. He is not shocked or surprised by anything we have done. His blood can cleanse us from all unrighteousness. WE can be forgiven.

We must be forgiven. There is no way we can make up for our mistakes by our own efforts. No amount of money. No amount of pain will make up for what we have done. Only Jesus has paid the price in order that we might be set free from the curse of sin and death. What we have to do is turn away from those sins that we have been caught up in and turn to God in repentance and faith, to find his acceptance and forgiveness and inclusion into his family. We will also be given his Holy Spirit, his presence with us day by day. So that it is in his strength that we go forward, that we go out into the world, to live for him, to resist the temptations that the Devil throws at us, day in and day out.

And when we know God's forgiving power, we will also know God's healing power in our lives and in our bodies and in our relationships.

For it is just the sort of sins that we have looked at in this passage that cause so much brokenness and pain in so many lives on our society today. And God wants to bring healing and cleansing and renewal through his gospel and through his Holy Spirit to each one of us.