

HEROD, JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS

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

Ephesians 1. 3-14

Mark 6. 14-29

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today's gospel story has many points, a number of which we will miss if we take it out of its context. That context, the sixth chapter of the gospel of St Mark, is set well into the book (you will remember that Mark's gospel has only 16 chapters). As we saw last week, chapter six began with our Lord's return to his home town. Jesus had done many miracles and had attracted a lot of attention to himself elsewhere; but when he returned home, his power was oddly limited. The people there, who had known Christ as a boy, asked, 'Where does he get all this?' They said, 'this fellow's a lowly carpenter. We know his mother; we know his brothers and his sisters.'¹ And St Mark is writing with a bit of irony here, for the townspeople do not know that Joseph is not our Lord's real father.

All of this goes unsaid by Mark, who sets before us the sad case of people who think that they know things, and who in particular have a preconception of our Lord that cuts him down to size. Thinking that they know who Jesus is, the townspeople are unable to appreciate the amazing things that Christ could do, right there in their midst. Mark tells us that in the end, our Lord was able to heal only a 'few sick people' in his home town.

But Mark's overall point is the overwhelmingly amazing power of Jesus. The next thing that he tells us is that Christ sent out his disciples in pairs. This was our Lord sharing his authority with his disciples, who then immediately went out to preach, to

¹ Some commentators have suggested that Jesus's brothers and sisters were actually children of a previous marriage of Joseph.

cast out demons, and to heal the sick. As those disciples did great work, Jesus's own power was multiplied through them.

And to emphasise the extent of the news of this amazing power of Christ being multiplied throughout the land, Mark inserts the story of John the Baptist's death. Let us consider for a moment how Mark masterfully unfolds this story

Firstly, he tells us that even the king Herod had heard about what was going on; and upon hearing of these mighty works that our Lord had been doing, Herod leapt to a fantastic conclusion: that Jesus was John the Baptist come back from the dead. Now when he tells us that Herod drew that conclusion, Mark then has to explain that John the Baptist *was* dead, and has to tell us about Herod's role in that event. It turns out that John had been dead for some time. We last heard of John back in the first chapter of Mark's gospel, where we were told that he had been arrested. Nothing has been said in the meantime. Mark, a masterful writer, saves the news for now in order to make a point.

The dispute had to do with Herod taking as his wife a woman called Herodias, who was the wife of his brother. John had rebuked Herod, and had told him that he was acting unlawfully. Herodias did not appreciate this, and wanted John killed. For his wife's sake, Herod had arrested John; but before he could kill him, something happened to Herod. Mark tells us that Herod came to 'fear' John; and that this fear came from 'knowing' that John was 'a righteous and holy man'. Herod seems to have been attracted to a power that he recognised in John. Herod observed John; he listened to him, and he liked to listen to him.

Please note how unusual this is. John got the attention of the king, and then he got the ear of the king, and then he got the king's mind and his heart; to such an extent

that the king would not allow John to be executed. Because of Herodias, Herod would not release John, but neither would he push forward John's execution.

As it happened, on his birthday Herod had a dinner with the high and mighty from all around. Courtiers and officers and the leaders of Galilee were all there. Herodias's daughter pleases the company with a dance, and Herod makes an oath to give her whatever she wants. Herodias seizes her chance, and the request is for John the Baptist's head to be delivered. Cornered, and unwilling to lose face in the presence of the leading men of the region, the king orders the execution. The head is delivered. The disciples of John go to retrieve his body and bury it.

And then in the very next verse (which unfortunately is not included in our appointed gospel reading for today), Mark tells us that the disciples of Christ returned to tell him with joy and amazement all that they had done and taught in his name. The story about John the Baptist and Herod is thus *sandwiched between* the sending and the return of our Lord's disciples on their highly successful mission of multiplying and magnifying the amazing power of Jesus.

And so we see that today's gospel is an interlude in a greater story; it is one story that has been put into a greater story in order to lead us to an appreciation of the surpassing magnitude of what Christ can do. John the Baptist managed to impress a king with his holiness and his righteousness; and that king put John to death and saw John's severed head in his own dining room. But John never did the amazing works that our Lord was doing throughout the land, in his own person and through his disciples.

Herod thought that John had come back from the dead; and that somehow, having come back from the dead, he was able to do greater works than he did when he was alive. But Herod was wrong. It wasn't John, it was Jesus. Mark wants us to see that

the best thing that ever happened to the world is that Christ came with power and demonstrated authority over human behaviour, over the demonic world, and over all kinds of disease. But Mark also wants us to see that it is sometimes possible for people to go to almost absurd lengths to resist this Lord who has come.

The sixth chapter of Mark's gospel began with the people in Jesus's hometown refusing to recognise him for who he is, because they thought that they knew where he came from. And when Herod thought that Christ was actually John the Baptist who had come back from the grave, he also failed to see our Lord for who he is.

Today, may you and I see Jesus afresh for who he is. May God increase in us a love and awe for Christ, in all of his vast and amazing power.

Amen.