

DEATH OF A PROPHET

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At: St James' Church, Lower Hutt.

On: Ordinary Sunday 15, 15th March 2018.

About: Mark 6:14-29

A Dramatic Story

Today's Gospel from Mark is a truly dramatic story.

It has the essentials of a dramatic cast - the King, the ambitious wife, the sensuous dancer, and the preacher. It has, too, the techniques of drama - the story is told in flash-back, Herod Antipas, hearing of Jesus' teaching, thinks back with guilt to when he was manoeuvred into having John the Baptist put to death.

And it has dramatic contrast. Set by both Mark and Luke between the sending out of the disciples to preach and to heal, and their return to report to Jesus, followed by the feeding of the 5 thousand, it has the structure of a dramatic interlude, a "meanwhile back in the royal palace".

The story has inspired art works, plays, and an opera by Ricard Strauss. Most of them focus on the dancer, who although not named in any of the Biblical accounts, is named Salome by the historian Josephus.

Lacking in Authority

Mark, in his Gospel, draws a vivid contrast between the life of Jesus and his disciples, and life at the court of Herod. Jesus and his disciples were working in the countryside, often teaching in the open air. Jesus urged his disciples to take the very minimum of belongings with them on their mission.

On the other hand, we have the description of a self-indulgent and morally bankrupt lifestyle in the Royal palace. This Herod, Herod Antipas was not in fact a king. He was a Tetrarch, a ruler over only part of a kingdom, and that is the title he is given in the other gospels. It may be that Mark in calling him King was being sarcastic, because it was in fact his desire to be king that eventually brought about his downfall. A few years after this, he asked the Roman Emperor for the title of King, was investigated, and banished.

Larry Hurtado, in his commentary on Mark's Gospel, says that

"the contrast inherent in this chapter shows that the rightful 'king' was not Herod, and that the places of earthly power and wealth with their customarily extravagant claims and style do not constitute the vehicle of God's salvation. Rather, it is in the humble ministry of Jesus that God manifests his provision for the world."

Lacking in principle

In the Gospel record, we find John the preacher enunciating a principle, a principle embodied in Jewish law, when he said that Herod was wrong to take his brother's wife.

Jesus, sending out the disciples to minister, gives them guidelines to follow - principles. He put limits on what they could take with them, so that they would be dependent on the hospitality of their host towns. He tells them to remain with



the first person who offers them somewhere to stay, so that they would not be tempted to be influenced by someone offering a more luxuriant bed.

Herod sometimes intended to do the right thing. But he didn't have firm enough grasp of moral principle. As a result, he allowed himself to be put into a position where eventually, there was no right choice available.

A grasp of principle is fundamental to justice in our society. From time to time we hear from those who work with children about the unwillingness of people to report child abuse. It's easy to understand that people don't wish to get offside with a relative, don't want to create an enemy by criticising or reporting the behaviour of a neighbour. As a consequence, known child abuse goes unchallenged, unreported, and unstopped. Because people do not focus on the principle that children who cannot protect themselves must be protected by society, less important considerations get in the way, and children go unprotected, sometimes with tragic results.

Christians look to the Bible and the teaching of the Church for the principles that must guide all behaviour. Some in our society portray Christian comment on social and political issues as people imposing their personal belief on others. But a principled moral code is essential for a just society. If we are not to adopt the Christian one, if some other moral code is proposed, then we are entitled to enquire - where does it originate and what are its principles?

Lacking in commitment.

Herod wondered about Jesus. He listened to the gossip and pondered the alternative explanations. But he never went to find out. St Luke suggests that Herod wished to see Jesus for two reasons. Firstly, because he had an unhappy conscience about the execution of John the Baptist and was worried that John had been resurrected. And also, because he hoped to see him perform some miracle - for entertainment, to be used in the same way he used his wife's daughter, to entertain his guests.

Repeatedly, in the gospels, our Lord rejects those who ask for a sign. He tells them to go away and repent. When Jesus finally met Herod, on the day of his crucifixion, he had nothing to say to him - because Herod had already heard the call to repentance from John and had rejected it.

In marked contrast to the attitude of Herod is that of Peter. Two chapters further on, the disciples tell Jesus what people are saying about Him in the same words that are used of Jesus here - and Jesus says "But who do you say that I am." Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

We live in an age where there is a tendency to analyse everything to destruction, to feel that everything should be proved, established, to an absolute certainty. I learnt, when I was thinking of getting married, that you can never be certain beyond the possibility of all doubt, that you are doing the right thing. You have to make the choice, ask the girl, buy the ring, book the Church, make a commitment, or it's not going to happen, and you'll spend the rest of your life wondering how it would have been! The illusion that certainty can be achieved is one that has made both marriage and faith less popular in our time.

What Christ requires of us, is that we make a commitment, step out, put something into it. Peter took the step of declaring his belief, Herod spent the rest of his life wondering.

A Greater Story

Mark's story uses flash-back to show how Herod's uneasy conscience drove him to curiosity about what Jesus and the disciples were doing. But the story points forward also, to a story about another man who came before the civil authorities for trial, whose judge, Pilate, like Herod, didn't want to pronounce the sentence but weakly allowed himself to be influenced by others who hated the accused for their own personal reasons. And just as John's disciples came and took his body away for burial, so Joseph of Arimathea was to collect and entomb the body of Jesus after his crucifixion.

Mark places the story of John here, following the sending out of the disciples, to show that the outcome of Jesus's ministry, the true work of the kingdom, was for Him to suffer and die.

This story is drama indeed. But it points to another story, a story that ends not in rumour of a miracle-worker raised from death, but in the glorious proclamation that Christ is risen, and that is the greatest story ever told!

