

Sunday 14th July 2024

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Gospel Reading

Mark 6.14-29

The Death of John the Baptist

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' ¹⁵ But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It 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.'

¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²² When his daughter Herodias 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.' ²³ And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' ²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' ²⁵ Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' ²⁶ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Other Readings: 2 Samuel 6.1-5,12b-19 Psalm 24 Ephesians 1.3-14

Homily

The first part of our reading raises, perhaps, the most important question anyone can be asked. Who is Jesus? We may know that later in Mark's gospel Jesus asks the disciples: "Who do you say I am?". How we answer this question has eternal consequences. For those who accept Christ as their Saviour and put their trust in Him, God adopts them into His family and they enter His Kingdom. That's the good news of Jesus!

Romans 10 verse 9 tells us: “If you acknowledge and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord [recognizing His power, authority, and majesty as God], and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved”. (*Amplified Version*).

In this passage we find King Herod struggling to answer the same question. Some around him were saying that Jesus was a prophet. Perhaps Elijah himself had returned? Herod however concluded that Jesus must be a resurrected John the Baptist; a man Herod respected as a righteous and holy man, but had killed in an act to save face. We find out more about that in the second part of this passage, which takes us slightly back in time...

While John was alive, his condemnation of Herod's marriage became the source of a marital dispute. However, Herod's respect for John meant that he sought to protect him. He silenced John's justified criticism of his unlawful marriage by placing him in prison, hoping this would satisfy his angry wife. But no; she seized on an opportunity to have John killed. As Herod's step-daughter danced, he felt compelled to offer her anything she wanted. We can easily imagine, even if we'd rather not, the sordid mixture of motivations that led to this foolish offer. When the dancer asked for John's head on a platter at the direction of Herod's vengeful wife, Herod's pride and reputation were at stake in front of a party full of V.I.Ps.

Herod had wanted to protect John and liked listening to him. Could he kill a holy man? But now his honour was at stake. His influential and powerful guests expected Herod to keep his word. Despite being deeply grieved, the only way to save face was to order the beheading of John. How Herod must have regretted his rash promise made in the heat of the moment.

So, what about you and me? What can we learn from this? We're not immune to the problem, for sure. We too can discover that our indulgence of sinful desires, our yielding to what seem like 'innocent' temptations, has painted us into a corner and made it very difficult to do what we know is right. How might we avoid these dangers in the future?

Our faith warns us of the dangers of lust, of greed, of a craving for power and status that gradually erode our ability to behave well. These warnings are not intended to spoil our fun or limit our freedom – quite the opposite. They are rooted in the wisdom that true joy and liberty come to those who obey God's loving will.

And what about our need for the approval of others when that approval comes at a cost to our integrity as Christians. Herod faced the internal fight between satisfying the crowd and standing up for righteousness. Pilate, too, faced the same issue when hearing the crowd's response to the choice of Barabbas or Jesus. We can face the same struggle. It's so easy to 'go with the crowd', to comply with the social norm of the day, to follow cultural trends, to 'fit in', be accepted. But, in doing so, we can sometimes compromise our own integrity and offend the God we say we love and serve, and the Lord Jesus who demonstrated His amazing and powerful love and forgiveness.

Augustine of Hippo said: "Right is right even if no one is doing it; wrong is wrong even if everyone is doing it."

How do we behave when we find ourselves amongst friends, family or colleagues whose moral and behavioural values are less than those we wish to hold for ourselves? Or, more importantly, those values that God holds dear? How easy is it to join in with others when gossip is happening; unfair criticism is being metered; crude jokes shared, or; the stationery cupboard is being raided? Being a part of any group gives us a sense of 'acceptance' and 'privilege', but let's not sacrifice our values along the way. With the Holy Spirit's help let's hold on to those precious things that speak of light and life:

Truth;

Patience;

Kindness;

Mercy;

Generosity;

Encouragement

Forgiveness

Faithfulness

Self-Control

...Integrity

Amen.

Conversation Questions

1. Sometimes we can be weak in giving into temptation, but later regret it; maybe feeling guilt or shame. What strategies could we put in place to help us overcome temptation?
2. How important is integrity in the life of a Christian? Perhaps share any experiences where you have stood out from the crowd for something you believed in or valued.
3. Is there anything else from the passage not already discussed that speaks to you? What is it?
4. What will you do this week in your Monday-to-Saturday ministry in response to what you have heard today? #everydayfaith

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer, responding to what you have heard today and listening to what God might be saying to you.

Collect of the day

Lord of all power and might,
the author and giver of all good things:
graft in our hearts the love of your name,
increase in us true religion,
nourish us with all goodness,
and of your great mercy keep us in the same;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

(or)

Generous God,
you give us gifts and make them grow:
though our faith is small as mustard seed,
make it grow to your glory
and the flourishing of your kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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