

6th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 10B)

Mark 6.14-29

St Luke's, Chelsea

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On 1 March 1757 the servant Robert-François Damiens was condemned to death. After his failed assassination attempt on the French king Louis XV, the order was put out that Damiens was to be "taken and conveyed in a cart, wearing nothing but a shirt, holding a torch of burning wax weighing two pounds"; then, "in the said cart, to the Place de Grève, where, on a scaffold that will be erected there, the flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs and calves with red-hot pincers, his right hand, holding the knife with which he committed the said parricide, burnt with sulphur, and, on those places where the flesh will be torn away, poured molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together and then his body drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds".

We are fortunate enough to live in a country where such events seem firmly consigned to the pages of history books. Yet we must also know, however much it hurts to bring it to mind, that this very moment many men and women face with dread punishment as gruesome as that inflicted on Damiens. Leaders who feel threatened fight fear with fear. And so in the dark dungeons of Syria, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere these horrors persist, sometimes over the last twenty years shockingly aided by our own governments.

It is this world of political power – and the extent to which fear rises in us precisely as our power grows – that our gospel reading today addresses. Mark breaks from his account of Jesus's ministry to tell the ghastly story of the execution of John the Baptist.

At the centre of the story, all action taking place through him, is Herod. (This is, by the way, Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who on hearing of Jesus's birth ordered the execution of all infants in Bethlehem.) We might initially imagine this Herod as a swaggering Henry VIII-esque figure, with power over all around him. Yet as we read the story, we discover the extent to which Herod acts through fear. Herod, Mark tells us, feared John, 'because he was a righteous and holy man'. But Herod is also bound by his word: it is 'out of regard for his oaths and for the guests' – and the fear of shame if he broke his promise – that Herod agrees to his daughter's demand, however much it upsets him.

Yet it is not just Herod who is afraid. Why did Herod's wife Herodias want to kill John? Because John had warned Herod of the rule in the Book of Leviticus against marrying your brother's wife. She fears for her influence if Herod were to heed John's warnings.

And then we have Herod's daughter. In the wake of Oscar Wilde's play about her, *Salomé*, we might be tempted to imagine her as a powerful seductress, using her feminine charms to her advantage. Yet Mark simply tells us that she 'danced' for her father. What's more, Mark describes her as a 'girl' – in Greek, *korasion*, a word which he otherwise uses to describe a twelve-year old girl.¹ Perhaps she is less a tempter than a young pre-adolescent, caught up between the schemes of her mother and the grand public gestures of her father.

None of the family comes out well. This is a scene of arrogance, of folly, of sin. Ostensibly the scene ends with all satisfied, but we may hardly imagine that the conversation around the breakfast table the next morning was full of joy. In this family, thoughts of love are squeezed out by the need to keep power, and the fear of losing it.

And of course the person who suffers above all from this is John the Baptist. The innocent man who has dared to speak the truth is hauled out of his prison cell, summarily executed, and his head brought to the party-goers. As ever, it is the underprivileged, the powerless, who suffer most from the machinations of the powerful.

The scene is a striking break away from the various actions of Jesus by the Sea of Galilee. Yet it is not entirely unique in the gospels. We see the power-focused world inhabited by Herod and Herodias one more time, towards the end of the gospel, when Jesus encounters Pontius Pilate. Both Herod and Pilate are apparently in charge. Both respect their prisoner, and recognise not just the innocence of John and Jesus but also the truth that they speak. Yet both are unable to back down after being publicly outmaneuvered, and so send an innocent person to his death.

And indeed the interactions at Herod's banquet form a scene we may recognise today. We can recognise it, for instance, in the similar sphere of high politics. We may joke about the dangers even today of criticising our leader's marital arrangements. But we may also pity, after a fortnight in which two cabinet ministers have announced the end of their marriages, the challenges for politicians in maintaining a happy home life. As Sarah Vine put it in the *Mail on Sunday*, a few days before her divorce from Michael Gove

¹ Mark 5.41-42

was announced: ‘Climbing that far up Westminster’s greasy pole changes a person. ... The problem with the wife who has known you since way before you were king of the world is that she sees through your facade. She knows your fears and your insecurities. She knows that, deep down inside, you are not the Master of the Universe you purport to be. And some people don’t like to be reminded of that.’²

It can be difficult for those who hold great power to deal with it. But we all hold power in different areas. Power over employees. Responsibility for children, for older people or other family members in our care. Control of particular resources that we can use for good or ill. The ability to bring to the lives of those with whom we interact laughter or misery. Power exercised in a variety of fashions. We can all at times find ourselves like Herod with power over others, while also being overcome like Herod with the fear of losing power.

So I wonder where you, today, see yourself in this story. In what sense are you Herod, seen by others as all-powerful and yet fearful for the authority you have? In what sense are you Herodias, wielding the power behind the throne but concerned it may all come crashing down? In what sense are you the daughter, feeling forced to use your influence at the whim of others? In what sense are you John the Baptist, speaking truth but suffering for it?

Today’s gospel speaks of an earthly feast filled with power and intrigue. Yet it is only the first of two feasts in this chapter of Mark’s gospel. For immediately after this story is told, Jesus travels into a remote area. The crowds follow him, eager to hear his teaching. And when night falls, Jesus takes from the disciples five loaves and two fishes, blesses the food and distributes it to the 5000 there.

In that feast of bread and fish we have a foreshadowing of the abundance and generosity of the kingdom of God – a stark contrast to the power games of Herod’s banquet. John’s commitment to truth, and his death because of it, is itself a foreshadowing of Christ’s own passion. We live for now in that earthly realm. We are called, like John, to take up our cross and follow Christ wherever it may lead us. We are called to use our power for the good of our neighbour, not for our own benefit. And in doing so, may we be signs of the coming heavenly banquet. For, in the power of the Spirit, we can welcome others to a way of life where fear is usurped by trust, accumulation by generosity, and hatred by joy.

² <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-9728749/SARAH-VINE-problem-wife-knows-youre-not-Master-Universe.html>