

## Prayer

Heavenly Father, we praise You and thank You for all the love, goodness and faithfulness You have poured out on us over the years. You have given us many wonderful gifts; help us therefore to accept the difficulties and troubles that come our way, and bear them in the knowledge that You are in control of all things and always leading us towards our eternal salvation. Thank You heavenly Father; AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Fire services

*Pray for those in the fire services nearest to your home and your church. Pray God's blessing on them and their work in saving lives and assisting people in grave danger.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray about Pakistan and its internal war against the Taleban*
- *Ask God to stir up industrial leaders to clean up their industries*
- *Give thanks to God for your health, and His power to heal*

## Meditation

Lord God, give us courage to demonstrate what we believe;

Let us be compassionate because of Jesus' love for us,

Let us be brave because we trust in the Lord's protection:

Let us be peaceful because Jesus taught the way of peace,

Let us be victorious over evil because the battle has been won:

Let us be careful because God's Word teaches us to be wise,

Let us be daring in action because we trust Your guidance:

Let us be honest because the Gospel demands our integrity,

Let us be forthright because we believe God's Word is truth.

Lord God, continue to inspire us by our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

## Bible Study - Matthew 14:1-12

<sup>1</sup> Around then, Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus; <sup>2</sup> and he said to his servants, 'This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are working through him.'

<sup>3</sup> Herod had arrested John, bound him, and thrown him in prison, because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. <sup>4</sup> John had been telling him, 'It is against the law for you to have her.'<sup>5</sup> Herod wanted to kill John, but he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet.

<sup>6</sup> Then, when Herod's birthday came, Herodias' daughter danced for the guests. She pleased Herod <sup>7</sup> so much that he swore to give her whatever she might ask. <sup>8</sup> Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me John the Baptist's head on a platter.'<sup>9</sup> The king was upset, but because of his oath spoken in front of the guests, he ordered that it be given to her; <sup>10</sup> and he had John beheaded in the prison. <sup>11</sup> His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who

brought it to her mother. <sup>12</sup> Then his disciples came and took his body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.

## Review

We are taking a break from our study of Exodus, and throughout two weeks, we will delve into a series of fascinating events at the centre of Jesus' ministry in Matthew's Gospel (14:1-17:13). The first of these is the awful story of John the Baptist's death (14:1-12), but after this, we go on to read in quick succession about the feeding of the five and then the four thousand (14:13-21 and 15:32-39), Peter's walking on water (14:28-33), and his confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi (16:13-20), followed by transfiguration (17:1-8), and much more! This is the point in the Gospel at which Jesus turned away away from Galilee and the crowds that followed Him, and set His face to Jerusalem. He taught as no one else, He cured the sick and cast out demons, He defeated all the scholars of His day in public displays of amazing intelligence, wit and cunning; but the task given Him by the Father was to save the World, and for that, He had to go to Jerusalem.

The tragic story of John the Baptist's death comes exactly half way through the Gospel. Everyone, including His family, was talking about Jesus and asking where His power had come from (13:54-58). Even Herod the Tetrarch, the ruler of the region, was asking the same question (14:1,2). Just previously, he had dealt with another prophet, John the Baptist, who had dented his authority and prestige, and he was worried that what happened before with John would be repeated with Jesus (14:1-3). Herod may have mistakenly thought Jesus was a resurrected John the Baptist, but his troubled mind correctly connected Jesus' teaching and miracles with the judgements of God (14:2), something other people, including Jesus' family, had failed to do. So it is that a story about John the Baptist begins the second half of Jesus' ministry in Matthew's Gospel, just as it did the first (chapter 3).

John's death was tragic because he was the man who first accepted Jesus, declaring in his preaching that Jesus was 'the Christ' (3:11-15). We read all this and ask the question 'why?' Surely, God had intervened in the midst of past human cruelty to save others (as in the miracles of Elijah, see 1 Kings 17:17-24), so why not here? The answer lies only in the heart of God, but the death of John the Baptist now stands as an eternal testimony to the corruptions of sex, wealth and power in human society. His death highlighted the moral corruption at the heart of the Jewish state, which despite the guilty conscience of Herod, was incapable of doing anything other than rejecting both John and Jesus. Few who read this story can fail to perceive that Herod's actions in killing John the Baptist are not untypical of the worst political dictators and despots of human history.

Many of the details of what happened to John after he preached in the Jordan region (3:1-17) are unclear, but it seems that he challenged Herod's incestuous sexual relationships (14:3,4), the details of which (as we will see later) are not easy to work out! As a result of John's outspoken words, he was taken to prison, most probably the infamous dungeons of Machaerus where those regarded as a threat to the public order were detained in appalling conditions. Herod was only the cause of John's death because he was a foolish ignorant man, who played into the hands of Herodias, the wife he had stolen from his half-brother Philip. She wanted to kill John for exposing herself and Herod, and she manipulated a quite disgusting sequence of events to ensure that John was killed (14:10,11). With great dignity, John's disciples retrieved his body and buried him.

The whole story warns us that the story of Jesus is not fairy tale of wonderful teaching and healing, with the added intrigue of a popular hero outwitting the authorities. It is a story of life and death, and Jesus was aware of this, as we will soon find out (16:21f.). We must never forget that the liberty of faith we enjoy and the peace with God that has been given

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. If you have access to a Bible dictionary or other reference, look up the 'Herod' family tree, to work out who ruled what, and who was married to whom!
2. Was the death of John the Baptist part of the revelation of the Kingdom, or was it simply a by-product of evil times?
3. Do you know of people who have been martyred, that is, killed because they would not retract their faith? Tell their story.

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*The death of John is a terrible reminder of the nature of inhumanity within society. We are sometimes shocked when reading news articles about terrible things that have happened with the authority of our governments, but we feel powerless to do anything about them. It is our Christian duty to pray about such things and for the people involved, and ask that God's Kingdom might come in power and authority to bring justice to what sometimes feels like a very unjust world.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Have you ever faced 'life or death' situations in your Christian discipleship? You may say 'no' to this question quite easily, but please do think. We are often involved with issues that may not seem this serious, but may well be for others.*
- *Find out what you can about John the Baptist from whatever sources you can, and construct in your mind a greater picture of this figure; someone who Jesus felt deeply about.*

## Final Prayer

O Lord, when people all around us reject the Christian faith, give us the presence of mind to stand firm in You. Your hand is our guide, Your Spirit is our strength and Your love is our comfort. If we remain in Your presence, then no-one can take this away from us. AMEN

us, has been won at the expense of Jesus' death, and the death of all the prophets before Him.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The social setting; Herod, John the Baptist, and Jesus
- Herod and Herodias, the incestuous marriage
- The slaughter of John the Baptist

### **Notes on the text and translation**

**V1** *'tetrarch'* This is the Greek word for someone who ruled a small area of land, and did not have the magnificence or authority of an absolute king.

**V3** *'because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip'* There is some confusion between the different Gospel versions of this account and the evidence of other texts about Philip (see Luke 3:19, and Mark 6:17). Several of the ancient manuscripts from which we 'work out' the original Greek text have variations in this verse, and some omit 'Philip'. On balance, the connections are strong enough for us to accept the standard text, but the variations testify to the confusion even in ancient times about who was married to who.

**V9** *'The king was upset, but because of his oath spoken in front of the guests'* There are differences between ancient manuscripts about the exact placement of a small Greek word that makes a big difference. Either the king was upset because of John the Baptist, or because he had made a fool of himself. I have purposefully translated the passage so that this remains unclear. It is probably unwise for us to be too presumptive about what his motives for any of this were.

### **Going Deeper**

#### **Herod, John the Baptist, and Jesus**

The Tetrarch Herod Antipas was the ruler of the central regions of Israel and Galilee. 'Tetrarch' refers to the one quarter of the region of Palestine that he ruled after the division of Israel after the death of Herod the Great (in 4BC). The story today is actually a report of Herod's guilty response to the ministry of Jesus, followed by an explanation of this by means of the report of the death of John. As is often the case with people who feel they have bigger issues to deal with, Herod interpreted what he heard according to his own agenda and with scant regard for the truth. Nevertheless, he correctly linked John and Jesus, but for the wrong reasons. Herod had killed John and the thought was probably in his mind that Jesus should be dealt with as soon as possible.

Herod was plagued by a guilty conscience and was afraid that he would be 'found out' for his immoral behaviour. He did not want to endure again the public humiliation of a popular prophet waging a campaign against him (as John had done); he did not know that Jesus was not interested in him. Jesus' ministry was a significant social phenomenon, and whilst the religious authorities were already embroiled in contention with Jesus over His teaching and miraculous works, what He did could not remain hidden. We are told that Herod's first impressions of Jesus were obtained from his servants, who knew the gossip of the day (14:2). Jesus could indeed have picked on Herod as John had done, and the end result would have been similar, but it would not have served God's purposes for the redemption of the world. No, Jesus was heading to Jerusalem in order to face the wrath not just of Jewish authorities, but of the world; not the corrupt oriental court of this despised local ruler who had little to do with real Judaism.

Herod killed John without a shred of humanity or justice, but he did not come back to life. The Messiah he preached about, the same Jesus Herod was now worried about, would die later with greater inhumanity and injustice, but then come back to life with eternal consequences and for the salvation of the world.

### ***Herod and Herodias, the incestuous marriage***

There is disagreement in Biblical and non-Biblical records about the family of Herod Antipas. The whole family of Herod's were descendants of Herod the Great, who had ruled Israel and Palestine as one large region of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus' birth with a rod of iron. When he died, the region he ruled was divided into four, and shared out between four of his legitimate and illegitimate sons, and Herod Antipas was one of these. For the sake of interest, the son of Herod who ruled in Judea after the death of Herod the Great was Archelaus. He was a despot and had married a woman who was the widow of his half brother Alexander, and he was deposed by Rome after a popular revolt against him. Jews petitioned Rome to get rid of him, and Rome imposed a series of 'procurators' to rule Judea in his place; and at the time of Jesus' death, this was Pontius Pilate. It is worth bearing this story in mind, because it adds to our understanding of both the sexual intrigues within the Herod family, and also the concern of Herod Antipas not to have a popular prophet bothering him!

The sexual intrigue surrounds the notorious Herodias, a woman who was first married to Philip, a half-brother of Herod Antipas. It is not known whether Herod Antipas seduced Herodias or Herodias seduced Herod Antipas, but she left Philip and went to live with Herod Antipas, incidentally, leaving him in the same dubious marital position as his other half brother Archelaus! Historical records about all this are a little confused because there was another ruler in the region called Herod Philip, yet another half brother who was also a Tetrarch and ruled in the region of Batanea and Trachonitis. To add to all this intrigue, it is relatively well established that Herod Philip married Salome, Herodias' daughter, the girl who performed the infamous dance in our passage today (14:6)! The incestuous relationships are extraordinary, and are indicative of the heady mix of sex, money and power within which the rulers of various parts of Israel lived in those days!

Herod had imprisoned John because he had objected to Herod's incestuous marriage to Herodias, and he feared that what happened to his half brother Archelaus would happen to him. Everyone knew full well that the Law in Leviticus 18:16 forbade a man to marry his brother's wife, yet Herod Antipas (like Henry the eighth!) regarded himself as above the law in such matters. His political manoeuvring would bring him to his end however, because when he went to Rome to try and acquire the title 'King' from the Emperor, Caligula deported him to Lyons in Gaul and gave his lands to Agrippa. His only solace was that Herodias went into exile with him!

### ***The slaughter of John the Baptist***

The sordid story of John the Baptist's beheading is awful; a young princess (probably around 12 to 14, and probably named Salome) was, quite frankly, abused by her mother. She was required to perform a dance in front of guests (probably male) for their pleasure at Herod's birthday, a profoundly unusual and provocative demand. All such dancing was sexually provocative, and Salome's mother knew that what she did would command a high price. The girl was then manipulated by her mother into demanding the head of John the Baptist when her own step-father offered her whatever she wanted (14:7), and to cap it all, she was required to take his severed head on a platter and give it to her mother in public view. The whole incident demonstrates the appalling depths of moral depravity found in the 'high society' of Judaism in Jesus' day.

Pathetically, Herod wanted to be known by the people of his day as a 'good Jew'. Yet it was abhorrent to Jews for people to be beheaded (it was forbidden in Jewish Law), it was abhorrent for a man to marry the wife of his brother-in-law (see Archelaus and Lev 18:14), it was also illegal for anyone to be put to death without a trial. Consequently, Herod was riddled by guilt, even to the point of a pathetic 'upset' at the request for the death of John (14:8). Herodias was clearly not concerned, and Salome did as she was told. Just like Jezebel the Old Testament 'mother of evil' who manipulated King Ahab to try and eliminate Elijah and others in order to acquire for himself whatever he wanted (1 Kings 17,21), she acted according to her predatory instincts, sacrificing everything for the higher goal of 'winning friends and influencing people', and possibly sexual gratification as well. It is part of ancient folklore that unsurprisingly, she passed these hereditary traits on to her daughter Salome.

The last verse of our passage describes the action of John's disciples in removing his body from the dungeon of Machaerus to give it an immediate and proper Jewish burial. Their actions, like those of the citizens of Jabesh-Gilead who took the body of Saul after the battle of Mount Gilboa (1 Samuel 31), were regarded as holy. After completing the funeral rites, they came to tell Jesus (14:12) the terrible tale, and it is not surprising that Jesus was clearly upset (14:13).

### **Application**

The death of John the Baptist has great significance within the structure of Matthew's Gospel, indicating in particular the future of Jesus' ministry, but it is surely impossible to read this without being appalled. The more you look into this horrible episode in the Gospels, the more disgusting and gruesome it feels. Such a death is surely beyond civilised behaviour of any time or place, let alone amongst God's people, the Jews.

Jesus was also deeply affected by this incident, and it is likely that the references he made towards the end of his life about the Jewish people being responsible for 'killing the prophets' (Matt 23:34 etc.) was influenced as much by what happened to John the Baptist as any of the Old Testament prophets. Very few of them were killed, except the unnamed prophets killed by Jezebel in 1 Kings 18:13f.). Also, when Jesus died, Matthew says He 'raised the bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep' (Matt 27:52), and this was surely motivated by Jesus' desire to see the vindication of prophets such as John who was spiritually close to God and met such a horrendous death.

The suffering and death of John the Baptist foreshadowed the death of Jesus to come, and with that of Jesus, the death of martyrs over coming centuries as the infant Church grew in the midst of a largely hostile world. As such we should read this passage and watch carefully what God is doing, because although we shudder at the awfulness of what we have read, God used all these events to help us understand the power of salvation, and to help us understand that He is Lord of death as well as life. Yes, God is able to make sense of life and death. This may be hard for us whilst we are alive, but each one of us knows that we will die, and we fear death because it is a mystery, and we do not know the circumstances of what we will endure when the time comes. It is indeed part of our Gospel to tell the world that through Christ, we have confidence in what lies beyond the grave! Perhaps I am mistaken, but is it just possible that people have avoided this subject because they do not want to offend people by speaking about death today?

The sooner God's people start proclaiming a message that tells people we need not fear death, whatever the earthly circumstance, the sooner we will preach a message that is closer to the Gospel of the New Testament.