

ruling families throughout the Roman Empire, and it only goes to show how determined Herodias was to keep her influence widely spread through the ruling brothers of Judea.

It seems to me that Salome may well have been young, but certainly not 'innocent'. However her dance and her actions have been portrayed throughout subsequent history, Mark's story reports a clear strategy. At each stage of the action after Salome danced, Mark emphasises speed, with words like 'immediately' (6:25), 'at once' (6:25), 'promptly' (6:27), so that John's beheading reads like the execution of a well prepared plan. Herodias and Salome do not show any emotions in the story, but Herod Antipas was 'distressed' (6:26) at his own foolishness. His bragging about giving the girl 'even half my kingdom' was probably a drunken gesture, and it was not what he wanted.

Mark then leaves the story, uninterested in telling us any more about Herod, Herodias or Salome. The deed had been done and John was dead, and Mark reports with dignity that John's disciples came and took his remains for a respectful burial in a tomb. In due course Jesus would face different political manoeuvring and scandal which would result in His unjust execution and burial in a tomb; and that is as much as Mark wants us to draw from this torrid episode in his Gospel.

Application

Within Scripture, we find two seemingly different strands of advice about how godly people should treat the authorities under which they live. One of these is epitomised by the well known verse from Romans 13; 'let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God ...' (Romans 13:1f.). On the other hand, we have stories like this today and also the whole story of Jesus' death at the hands of an incompetent Roman procurator, which make us want to say that the church of God should surely have nothing to do with the scandal and intrigue of how the authorities work. There are no easy answers, as Herod Antipas found out to his cost, quite apart from John and eventually Jesus, who died at the hands of the authorities. Perhaps our place is to accept and live under the authorities, but also to critically observe the corruption and salacious manipulation which takes place and expose it in God's name, as John the Baptist did. But we should make no mistake that in so doing, we will always place ourselves in danger, even in modern, so-called democracies.

This whole story began with Mark reporting what people thought of Jesus. This question will crop up again in his Gospel (Mark 8:27f. etc.), and it is a question which never goes away today. Every Christian should be prepared to give an answer to this question to whosoever asks it. Perhaps one place to start is to set the example of Jesus against the backcloth of human greed, exploitation and manipulation which remains a powerful influence within even democratic, financial and legal institutions. At every level of society, there are people who long to know the truth that God has something better than what they see on the news and what history shows. We must have an answer.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What are the different views today about who Jesus is or was?
2. Is history useful when people always seem to record things from certain points of view? Why do people always see and interpret things differently, as here?
3. How important is John the Baptist to our understanding of Jesus' life and death?

Discipleship

Who are the great prophets of our own day, who challenge the 'status quo' of our political and ruling systems in the name of God, exposing wrong doing and sometimes rank evil in the corridors of power? If you can answer this question, consider praying for that person or prophet. If you can obtain their email or address, send them a message of support so that they may know that what they do is appreciated by others within the church. If you are unable to do this, pray that God will raise up such people.

Final Prayer

Bless the special time we set aside to spend with You, Lord God. If we have been challenged, guide our response; if we have been at rest in Your presence, move us on. May we always be responsive to the movement of Your Spirit, and return to You each day with hope and confidence in Your guidance of our lives. AMEN

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, make us so aware of Your great love for all people that we cannot keep our faith to ourselves. May it burst out of us, overflow from us, and touch and envelop those around us; not because of what we do, but because of who You are. We give ourselves with complete allegiance to You, and ask that You do Your work through us, for our joy is to serve You; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Christ and Culture

Pray today for your own country, and consider those features of your own life which may be a mixture of Christian and cultural values; Christmas, Thanksgiving, 'holy' days (holidays) etc. Pray for all these aspects of life, and ask the Lord to help people remember the Christian history which lies behind them. May they be a true witness to faith in God through Christ.

Meditation

Love is powerful, much more than an emotion.

When things go wrong, love says 'stop';
Don't hold on to the angry torments of the evil one,
Reject them; seek out humility and repentance
Which the Holy Spirit urges deep within the heart.

When things go well, love says 'go';
Get going with vigour in the freedom of the Spirit,
And use the energy which God has given you
In passionate words and deeds; do all that's good.

When nothing happens, love says 'wait';
Hold on for a moment, and work things out with God,
Submit to His Word, to others, check things out,
For love will guide you in the path of everlasting life.

Love is powerful; it is the very heart of God.

Bible Study - Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴ King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name was known. Some were saying, 'John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and this is why 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, 'It is John whom I beheaded; He has been raised.'

¹⁷ For it was Herod who had sent men to arrest John, bind him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. ¹⁸ John had said to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' ¹⁹ So Herodias had a grudge against John and wanted to kill him, but she could not, ²⁰ because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When he heard him speak, he was deeply perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹ Eventually an opportunity arose when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers, his officers, and the leading men of Galilee. ²² When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; so the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for anything you want, and I will give it to you.' ²³ He bragged to her, 'I will give you whatever you ask me, even half my kingdom.' ²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the Baptist.' ²⁵ She rushed immediately to the king and asked, 'I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter, at once.' ²⁶ The king was deeply distressed; but because of his oaths and for the sake of his guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ So the king promptly sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him there in the prison, ²⁸ and he brought back the 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.

Review

Jesus had just sent His twelve disciples on a mission (6:6-13), and later on in chapter 6, we will read of their return and the discussion they had with Jesus (6:30) about what happened. Mark does not tell us much about this because his Gospel always focuses on Jesus; but he uses the natural break between the commission and return of the disciples on mission to tell us the story of the beheading of John the Baptist.

Of course, this story is about John, not Jesus, so why did Mark include it in his Gospel? He knew that Jesus was keenly aware of his link with John as the one who came before Him as a prophet, and what happened to John would one day happen to Him. Consequently, Mark tells us about John's death in order to introduce us to the idea that Jesus would die at the hands of the authorities. Previously, Mark has told us about the Pharisees' plot to kill Jesus (3:6), but so far, we have not heard anything from Jesus about this. When He begins to speak about it to the disciples (see 8:34-38), they are shocked; but this introduces the theme of His own suffering and death which eventually takes up almost a third of Mark's Gospel (chapters 11-16).

The first part of our reading sets the scene. It reports the confusion in Herod's court about John and Jesus, indicating the popular gossip about Jesus held towards the end of the Galilean phase of His ministry. People's opinions were divided. Either Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life, or He was Elijah, or a prophet like the ones 'of old' (6:15). If He was John the Baptist, then in the eyes of the people, His coming back from the dead would have explained his ability to perform miracles and other works of power such as healings. None of the Gospels records John as performing miraculous feats during his ministry; he preached repentance in a fiery manner and baptise all who responded (6:14).

It was the cherished hope of many that the returning Elijah would be the Messiah (Malachi 4:5). They believed that this would herald God's Last Judgement, just like our belief that Christ will return before the Last Judgement. Some believed that Jesus was Elijah returned, and others that He was a great prophet who could do great deeds because of the spirit God had placed in Him (6:15). The confusion was considerable; Jesus' ministry did not have a uniform response!

Herod (6:17f.) was clearly concerned that Jesus was a returned John, and he was concerned about this because John had challenged him deeply and he had been responsible for his death. Indeed, it may well be that Herod felt rather guilty about it! Herod Antipas was the ruler of the region of Galilee, just part of the greater Judea divided up after the death of his father Herod the Great. He had taken John prisoner because of his public opposition to Herod's marriage (6:18f.). The story of what happened to John is a sordid insight into the politics of the day, mixed as it was sexual intrigue and the manipulation of a young girl (believed to be Salome). Herod was also troubled by the fact that his own rash actions had led to the beheading of John (6:22,23f.) and the whole event had left Herod vulnerable. John died as a true martyr standing for the things of God and being prepared to endure the consequences of his God-given calling.

The people of the day held Herod responsible for beheading a man who they held as God's prophet. His actions did not help Herod in his primary objective, which was to keep the region of Judea stable within the Roman Empire; and in AD39, Caligula deposed him when he requested more power after failing to show that he could control Judea properly. For the people, the death of John was a gruesome and unpleasant tragedy; but for Mark, it helped to introduce the idea that the end result of Jesus' work would also be death.

Going Deeper

This part of Mark's Gospel is fascinating because we can compare the story Mark tells about the death of John with another ancient document with purports to tell the same story. We will look at this now and try to work out some of the details of what happened in the very murky world of the court of Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas – who was he? Who was he married to and who was his daughter?

The great King Herod ruled all Israel where Jewish people lived at the time of Jesus' birth, and we can now date his death as 4BC (this is the reason we are fairly clear that scribes in the days of the early church calculated the birth of Jesus incorrectly as AD0, and that He was really born around 5BC). When he died, his territory was split up into four parts and his sons each ruled one quarter, hence Herod Antipas' official Roman title as 'Tetrarch' ('ruler of a fourth') and it

was he who ruled in Galilee. He was not technically a 'king', but was probably thought of as such by the ordinary people, hence Mark's description of him in verse 14. Galilee was a relatively easy region to govern for Rome because there was a considerable number of multicultural towns and cities, probably outweighing the pure Jewish towns and regions. All he had to do was keep a nominal level of security and get the people to pay as much tax as he could get away with; a fixed portion going directly to Rome. It was an easy living.

We know about these matters because of the work of a Jewish historian towards the end of the first century called Josephus, who described the 'Herods' and their intricate family arrangements. However, what Josephus tells us about Herod Antipas and his wife and daughter, and about the beheading of John the Baptist, is quite different from what Mark tells us. Josephus tells us that Herod married one called Herodias who was the wife of a brother of his (also named Herod) who lived in Rome, not his brother Philip who ruled a nearby region of Judea. Josephus tells us that Philip was married to Herodias' daughter, whose name was Salome. This is quite different from the picture in Mark's Gospel. In addition, Josephus tells us that Herod had John the Baptist beheaded because of political manoeuvring, but does report a popular belief that Herod lost a regional war with local Arabs as punishment for beheading John (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18,5,1-2).

Some historians prefer to believe what Josephus wrote, but the differences could well be explained by the fact that Josephus merely copied the sanitised court records of the day, whereas what Mark records sounds far more like the gossip around the markets in Galilee! On purely historical grounds, there is good reason for us to question both records because there was obvious intrigue concerning who married who and when, coupled with a degree of incest within Herod's family, which was not unknown in ruling families of the Roman Empire.

In addition to all this, it is unfortunately the case that the crucial verse 22 in our passage above is quite unclear in Greek, and the ancient texts all show different possible readings of the same verse. Some Bibles say that the name of the person dancing was 'Herodias', and some say it was 'Herodias' daughter! I shall stick with tradition that the dancer was Salome the daughter of Herodias, but feel that the level of sexual intrigue in the whole story is very high and we will probably never know the half of it.

The death of John the Baptist

John had clearly observed the incest and sexual misdemeanours of Herod Antipas' life and spoken about it publicly, causing widespread discussion of the matter (6:17f.). Herod Antipas could not afford to have his personal life banded about because his Roman superiors would have seen that as weakness and this is why John was taken and put in jail. Josephus tells us that John was kept at Machaerus, an unpleasant fortified dungeon and palace near the Dead Sea, some way from Galilee where we assume the action takes place in the story. It would have been sensible for John to have been kept well away from the main centre of his popularity. From time to time, Herod took that chance to talk with John and found the encounters challenging. Scriptures says that Herod was 'deeply perplexed', but also 'liked' these conversations, and so kept John alive in the Machaerus prison.

Herod's wife liked John far less. She was a woman who had climbed the ladders of power and influence in the only way open to a woman and did not like her antics broadcast and mocked in public. She also seems to have been grooming her daughter Salome in the art of a sexual temptress (see below), and so the party at which Herod had invited all the important people of the region presented her with an excellent opportunity to pursue her ends, and have John done away with. She was not willing to have John's influence upon her husband even from prison.

Salome's performance before the assembled guests has been the subject of intrigue for centuries, and the reason for this is because under normal circumstances it would have been unheard of for a princess to have performed in this manner. The nature of such 'entertainment' is well documented and it was (and still is in some Arab quarters) of a highly sexual nature, and in front of a large number of half drunk men could be somewhat unpredictable. Yet history agrees that Salome danced, and did so to the great pleasure of the assembled men. It is my own conclusion that Herodias used her daughter in this way not just in this way for the beheading of John the Baptist, but also in order to help her climb her way to the top through the use of her sexuality. When history (Josephus) reports that Salome married Philip, Herod Antipas' brother who was either her own father or father-in-law (we do not know who Salome's father actually was), most people reckon that mistakes must have been made in the records. But in my opinion, there is plenty of evidence of equally outrageous goings on in many of the