

the cost of joy
a sermon preached on the
eighth sunday after pentecost
15 July 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Amos 7:7-14; Psalm 85; Ephesians 1:1-14; Mark 6:14-29.

This morning's reading from Mark's gospel account, reporting the death of John the Baptist, is one of those texts that preachers want to turn their eyes from. Sandwiched between the twelve disciples' triumphant mission of the healing the sick and casting out demons, on the one hand, and Jesus' feeding of the five thousand on the other, this is a story which disrupts the sense of God's power active in the world. Herod may be a tin pot general, but his presence in the text, and the fact that his successors are still only too active in our times, gives us a sense of unease in front of this story.

In the reading from Ephesians, we hear words of joyous assurance that God has held the world in love since the beginning of time and has now shown to humanity the nature of his love through Jesus Christ. Those who understand this will respond with an overflow of love, joy and praise. Everything points towards the life of faith as one of rejoicing, as one of blessed assurance, of God whose purposes do not change. Everything about this reading exults not only in God's power, but in the assurance that God draws us into relationship with him, inspiring out hope and our joy and our worship.

But then this gospel reading changes the whole tone. The story of the death of John the Baptist is not one that fills us with a sense of rejoicing. There is, to be sure, some high spirits, a birthday party that is marked with music and dancing, but also with the excess of human arrogance. The dance of the king's step-daughter has come down to us as one of the most momentous performances in history. In the Middle Ages Herodias' daughter was usually imagined as a very young girl, and her dance was depicted as a sort of acrobatic display with cartwheels and backward somersaults. Through time artists imagined her as older, with a more rounded figure, and her dance more sexual, more alluring. The story came to be about the inability of an old man to resist the wiles of his scheming wife and her attractive daughter.

As I look at the story again, I see more clearly that it is a kind of ghost story. It begins with Herod hearing of the deeds of Jesus, and his fear that this Jesus is none other than John the Baptist come back to haunt him. It is only once Mark has shown us Herod, insecure, frightened and coming to terms with his own capacity for cruelty, that he tells the story of the party when his rash promise has become the start of his nightmare.

Mark uses the technique of flashback, so familiar to us on television and at the movies, to show the contrast between the weak old man terrified at the thought that John is the agent of God's vengeance, and an earlier time when he seemed so full of bravado. Herod is delighted with his step-daughter's dancing: 'whatever you ask me, I will give you, even to half my kingdom' is his boastful display of power. Even so, it shows that there was a limit to what she could ask for, a price beyond which he was not prepared to pay. If she was the sweet eight-year-old acrobat, and not the temptress of the modern imagination, perhaps Herod imagined that she would ask for a puppy, or some beautiful jewels. He did not imagine the request of legend 'the head of John the

Baptist on a platter'. But the fault lies with Herod, who did not see that what was asked for went beyond the limits of his power.

And now he sits, surrounded by his advisors, terrified by the implications of what he has done. He has allowed the execution of John, knowing that it was wrong, but willing to see this thorn in the flesh removed. John told the truth, John exposed the arrogance of his claim to power, and now Herod lives haunted by the idea that the very thing he thought he had removed was returning for revenge.

This story reminds us of the cruel and dangerous world in which Jesus lived. Earlier on in chapter 3 Mark has already told us that Jesus' enemies have conspired against him to put him to death; and here in this story we are shown that this is no idle threat. Jesus, in his turn, will face a different ruler, Pilate, who acts against his better judgment, because he is frightened that his power will be undermined if he does not do what the crowd demand. The stories of John the Baptist and Jesus are both signs of the danger of speaking the truth of God in a world which is intoxicated by its own power. Mark's gospel account as a whole is an affirmation of holding that truth, even when the person cost is great.

Traditionally, Mark's gospel account has been seen as arising in a time when the community of believers was undergoing persecution, when it was difficult for them to talk about their faith in Jesus. Mark tells his story of John the Baptist and of Jesus in such a way that they become examples for a community feels that it is being silenced.

The gospel of joy and hope and promise that the Gospel's first readers believed is undermined by the fear that they feel. Mark's story is full of excitement and rejoicing at the power of Jesus to heal and forgive, to bring release from oppression. The opening chapters of this gospel from Mark are a breathless affirmation of the power of God over illness and demons, the powers that threaten to destroy human life. But the gospel also comes with its relentless demand. The joy we seek is complete when we understand not only the excitement of Jesus the miracle worker. It finds its full expression in the much more difficult figure of Jesus resisting the powers of the world, and overcoming through sacrifice and suffering. The gospel of hope and joy emerges only out of taking us the cross and following Jesus.

What are we to make of this dreadful story of political power gone wrong, of tyranny and fear, of a strong man ruler haunted by his own weakness? How does this story sit with our seeking after joy through the affirmation of faith in God?

The reader and hearer of Mark's gospel account can often feel distanced from a story that reflects a world more brutal, more corrupt, more politically volatile than we would ever hope to experience. And yet this story finds its resonance in our own world of greed and corruption. We might want to find refuge in the more comfortable stories that speak in an uncomplicated way of God the healer and provider. But attentive readers of Mark's account will know that their engagement with the gospel cannot leave them with eyes turned away from insistent voices in the world that demand our prayer and our action.

Listening to our readings today, we are carried away with the possibilities of joy and excitement at the realisation of the goodness of God. But we are also grounded in the reality of a world where all joy is hard won, where many struggle to know where their help will come from, or when their cries for justice will be heard. It seems to me that at the heart of the gospel stand these two principles, an unbounded trust in the goodness of God, and a deep commitment to those whose voices are silenced, those who fear the tyranny of oppression. In our hearing of God's word may we be filled with that joy, and may we understand how we are to bring strength to those who are in the deepest need of our prayers. Amen