

Sermon Archive 493

Sunday 14 July, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Mark 6: 14-29

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



It's fun and interesting sometimes to compare how the different gospel writers present a story in slightly different ways. Little differences can be revealing. A case in point is the story of the death of John the Baptist, and how the character of Herod is dealt with. In **Matthew's** gospel, Herod is someone who wants to kill John. The only reason he hasn't done so already, is that he fears the people. In **Mark's** gospel, Herod is trying to protect John. He likes him - finds him fascinating. In **Matthew's** gospel, when John dies, Herod is said to be "sorry". The Greek word used for sorry has the mood of "O dear, how sad, never mind". In **Mark's** gospel, Herod is said to be "exceedingly sorry" - and the Greek word used is the same as used to describe the deep distress that Jesus experiences in the Garden of Gethsemane. Mark's Herod is beside himself with what an awful thing has happened.

It's easy, isn't it, when we're critiquing those who govern us, happily to treat them as caricatures (like in Matthew's gospel), figures of two dimensions, whose motives are simple - simply good or simply bad. But actually, like all of us, the processing going on in their minds, and in their hearts, are complex. And probably, if we take trouble to go looking through their motivations, we'll find, even if tangled up in a sticky web of intrigue and options taken hostage, something that looks like good intention. Mark's Herod is no malevolent demon. He does end up releasing a river of blood - but maybe it's instructive for us to note that rivers of blood are not the sole preserve of a special category of people who are purely simply evil. Bad action is something shared by the only evil with the clumsy and the compromised, the out-foxed, those who didn't think carefully enough before opening their mouths. That might well include me - and maybe you.

For our purposes, let's simply note that here, not too far into the story of the Son of God, one of the early characters is killed by a responsible leader who has good intentions and isn't completely evil - well, according to Mark.

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Let's go forward a bit, to something much later in the story. Once again it's a worldly leader coming face to face with one of God's people, over whom (for the moment) he has political power. This time it's Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor - and the person in custody is Jesus, from Nazareth.

In Mark's gospel, the action around the trial is driven by the chief priests, who hold a consultation and take Jesus to be tried. **They** put the thing in motion. Pilate is just there, and after a few questions, is described as being amazed by the prisoner - impressed (just as Herod had been by John). Pilate then floats the existence of a clemency option to try to set him free. He knows that jealousy is driving the anger. He understands the motivation. He resists their call for crucifixion - until they up the volume. Not by the eager desire for evil, nor by any perverse desire to rid the world of Jesus, the generally sympathetic Pilate becomes the second morally-aware figure in the story to sacrifice the One who speaks for God. First John, now Jesus - is there a pattern developing here?

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In chapter 13 of Mark's gospel, Mark has Jesus speak to the people who will be reading the story - Mark's first audience, the people for whose sake he told the tale. And to these people, he says this:

“As for yourselves, beware, for they will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them . . . When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit. Sibling will betray sibling to death and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have

them put to death, and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

First John; then Jesus; now those who follow them? **Is** there a pattern developing?

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I guess it would be easier to understand the emergence of a pattern if we were living in a world of pure wrong, where God is hated, and people's motivations are a simple and texture-less evil. But as we know, those who have power in the world are Herod and Pilate (people who are not bent on destruction). So why the pattern? Why is Jesus so sure that persecution will find those who follow him?

It is contested who first said "The only thing necessary for the **triumph** of **evil** is for good people to do nothing" - but there's something to it, something about how wrong is **enabled** in the world. Perhaps, when we critique our world, to the end of preserving within it the testimony of God that leads to life, then we should not spend too much time trying to follow the thread to actors who are caricatures of evil. Perhaps we need to be looking at the broader matters of why good characters sometimes are channelled towards their worst. What is it, in Herod's case, for instance, that brings him to the killing of John? Careless speech; insecurity about appearing to break the oath he made in public; not understanding sufficiently the political desires of those around him - or their sense of hurt. There are reasons. There are causes. Why is Putin doing what he's doing to Ukraine? Why did Hamas do what it did on 7 October last year. We assume simple evil intention (because the action is evil) - but it's unlikely to be that simple. Everyone does what they do for a reason. Perhaps it's the church's responsibility to engage with the reasons - shall we say "attend to the condition", rather than simply to the "symptoms"?

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A second responsibility maybe also could be to attend to the often unprocessed observation that Herod wanted to protect John, because there was something in John's testimony that he couldn't understand,

but found beguiling. If that fascination with John's testimony was what caused him not to kill John at the outset, but to try to protect him, then is there something inside Herod that we need to cultivate? - cultivate people's vague recognition that there is life in the Word? Even if our cultivation is a quiet testimony to Herod's broken conscience, like picking up John's body afterwards and laying it in a tomb with love. See how they love! In contrast with the death that's been caused, behold this deed of love . . . What is this life in the Word?

But alas, suddenly we are distracted. The music begins, the dancers arrive. A ridiculous offer is made, and the axe falls on the neck. Suddenly too late - how did it happen? God, happen it did. His name was John. His name was Jesus. By what name will we (who follow) be mourned when the pattern emerges around us!

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I'm not quite sure how to finish this sermon. We hear indeed that Herod didn't know how to finish his engagement with what had gone wrong - except we do know that John continued to haunt him - "yes, this is John come back to haunt me from beyond the grave", he'll say. The engagement isn't something from which he can step away.

Maybe **we** finish simply by praying that we, the people of Jesus, might not be distracted by the kinds of things that led Herod and Pilate to their poor decisions - but might (in a world that's very complicated) embrace our calling to cultivate the hearing of the speaking of the prophets.

Lucky Norman gets to explore some of this in our prayers for the world! For the moment, we keep a moment of quiet.