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Introduction

Today's gospel reading involves one of the most notorious birthday parties in literature – a sordid tale of too-close relationships*, rashness, and revenge, culminating in a gruesome climax! At first sight this unedifying story appears both strange and misplaced: it is the longest Markan pericope but not only is Jesus conspicuously absent from it, the story is actually a flashback rather than contemporaneous with the other events in the chapter; moreover it is situated in the middle of another story to which it has no apparent connection. However digging a little deeper will show us that once again Mark is employing a clever narrative technique to expand his readers' understanding of the identity of Jesus and the nature and consequences of his mission. It also gives us chance to reflect on some of the difficulties that can arise when we find ourselves caught in tension between private opinions and public positions, especially when we act impulsively.

**Herodias was not only the wife of Herod Antipas' half-brother Herod Philip, but also the daughter of another of his half-brothers – Aristobulus i.e. she was both his sister-in-law and his niece. Moreover her daughter by Herod Philip (Salome – the dancing girl of this story) would go on to marry Philip the Tetrarch, another half-brother of Herod Antipas and Herod Philip i.e. someone who was simultaneously her uncle and her great uncle!*

Preparation:

Call to mind a situation in which you found yourself acting in public in a way which was in conflict with your personal understandings or beliefs about a person or a situation. What was the outcome and what effect did it have on you?

Or

Read this passage alongside Mark 15:1–15 and consider what Mark tells us about the thoughts/actions/motivations of Herod Antipas and Pilate. Which character do you most sympathise with and why?

Text

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her.

For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."

She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.

Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Comment

This section of Mark's gospel presents us something of a conundrum: why does he suddenly break off from his narrative about the commissioning and return of the disciples to tell in flashback the story of John's fate (previously only hinted at in 1:14)? Indeed why do the lectionary compilers include this convoluted and gory tale of Herod Antipas' matrimonial entanglements (see above) and the revenge wreaked by Herodias in response to John's criticisms of these?

To understand something of the reason we need to look more closely at how this story sits within Chapter 6 itself and also within the broader narrative arc which Mark follows. In our earlier explorations of Mark's gospel in Lent 2 we saw how this falls into 3 main sections, in the first of which (1:16–8:21) Jesus enacts and explains the Kingdom of God through 'acts of power', preaching, and parabolic teachings about what this entails for those who would follow him. In Chapter 6 we see a shift up in gear in this process as Jesus, for the first time, includes his disciples in this dynamic enaction of the Kingdom of God: in the verses immediately preceding today's Gospel reading (vv 7–13) the disciples are sent out by Jesus to teach and heal. Mark notes that they 'cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.' In other words, the time for secrecy (another Markan motif we discussed in Lent 2) is over and a public declaration of intent is being made by Jesus.

How does this expansion of Jesus' mission connect up to the story of the death of John? Mark's segue in v14 gives us a clue: these activities (and thus the man behind them) draw the attention of those in authority, since they present a challenge to the social, religious (and ultimately) the political *status quo*. Herod's assumption that John has been resurrected is presumably rooted in a recognition of this challenge and its kinship to the way in which John, when alive, had 'spoken truth to power' in his confrontations with Herod over the latter's illicit relationship with Herodias (something which transgressed Jewish law: Leviticus 18:16; Leviticus 20:21).

Thus once again Mark uses the technique of intercalation (inserting one story into another in a way which allows them to illuminate each other), this time to point his listeners towards an understanding of the ultimate consequences of Jesus' move into a more public arena: by inserting this flashback into the gap between the commissioning and the return of the disciples, he sets before his readers a vision of what is to come: just as John met with obstruction and imprisonment when he threw down the gauntlet to those with public positions to maintain, so too Jesus will also draw the ire of those he challenges in the socio-religious and political arena (in fact Mark has already set up the pointers towards this in the opening verses of the chapter when Jesus is rejected in his hometown). For both men the consequences will also be the same – execution to placate those whom they have offended (cf Mk 15:10).

But alongside this Mark also shows us very clearly the horns of the various dilemmas on which Herod twists: he fears John, but at the same time respects and protects him as a righteous man; he is puzzled by John's words but also drawn by and responsive to them; he deeply regrets having to kill John – the strength of the sentiment is underlined by Mark's use of *perilupos* ('deeply grieved') which he also uses to describe Jesus' emotional state in Gethsemane (14:34) – but ultimately he is driven by his fear of the consequences of breaking a public oath (also a serious thing in Jewish society). Thus while Herod is caught in a trap by his own impulsive behaviour, he is very far from impervious to its emotional consequences. In the end we might find Mark's portrait of Herod to be more sympathetic than we originally assume given the terrible outcome of his actions.

There are also striking parallels between Herod's dilemmas and those which Pilate will encounter when he finds himself in a similar position with Jesus in Chapter 15 – the episode to which Mark is ultimately pointing. Both men are secretly sympathetic to those they are being urged to condemn to death, but both set in train events which escape their control and lead to them being outmanoeuvred in a very public way and thus trapped into an action they are keen to avoid.

So – what might we take forward from this sad story to help us in our explorations of the dimensions and dynamics of human behaviour in situations of conflict?

Firstly perhaps – following the stories of Jesus and John – that we cannot divorce our religious beliefs and behaviour from the socio-political world within which we are enmeshed: our understandings about the nature of God's Kingdom – of the peace and justice which are its cornerstones – cannot simply remain as private convictions, they must be articulated in word or deed. However this sort of challenge to the *status quo* may well end up bringing us *into* situations of conflict with authorities of various kinds, and this is something which we should be prepared for.

Secondly – following the stories of Herod and Pilate – we might want to reflect on the ways in which we tend to speak or behave in public in a situation of conflict or potential conflict, and of how these could potentially limit the degrees of freedom within which we can then act. Do our patterns of behaviour (particularly if these involve impulsive elements) open up creative spaces for dialogue and action, or close them down? Both Herod and Pilate had good impulses and intentions but their public manoeuvring ultimately undid these.

Response

Return to the preparation task you did.

If you considered a personal situation, can you identify any of the steps/stages which led to it (it might help to try and make these in the form of a list)? What lay behind these? Are there any which, with hindsight, you could have negotiated differently?

If you considered the stories of Herod and Pilate do a similar exercise of identifying the different stages which led to them being caught in a trap from which there was only one exit. Are there points of similarity or difference between the two stories?

Where and how might they have acted differently and are there things you can learn from this to help your own future practice?

Prayer

Jesus,
Incarnate Word –
Like John you accepted the consequences
of following your convictions;
May we likewise
have the courage and confidence
to speak out
when it is called for,
and the strength and perseverance
to hold to what we know is true,
even when it brings us into conflict
with the structures and powers
of this age.
Amen