

The cost of standing for the Truth

Mark 6:14-29



Salome With the Head of John the Baptist
Michelangelo Caravaggio, c. 1607

The story of John the Baptist's beheading is one of the most dramatic and moving in all of scripture. What was it like for John, dumped and chained in a dark hole, as he heard those feet approaching? He must have known what was coming and there is nothing to say it was clean or painless – how many strokes did it take? We shall never know. Unlike the beheadings of hostages on YouTube, we can't go back and have a look...

Apart from its drama, though, there is a lot that can be said about this passage which we can only touch on here:

- There are obvious parallels between this story and that of Jesus':¹ "John is Jesus' forerunner and has already been "handed over",² bound and treated badly; now he is put to death by a political ruler who recognises his goodness but is out manoeuvred by those who demand his death. The great difference, of course, comes only in the final sentence, telling of John's burial, which brings the story to a close.

¹ See these observations Morna Hooker, 'The Gospel According to mark' in Andrew Gregory, *The Fourfold Gospel Commentary*, SPCK, 2006, p.82; also Trempler Longman in, 'Mark' in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, CD ROM.

² Mk.1:14.

The passage begins, however, with rumours about his resurrection. These are false, but raise questions as to who Jesus might be” – a persistent theme throughout Mark’s Gospel as you will recall me mentioning in weeks past. Mark is careful to make sure that the stories of John, well circulated at the time of his Gospel,³ are not confused with that of Jesus, the risen one.

- There is also a parallel between this story and that of Ahab, Jezebel and Elijah in the first book of Kings. Ahab, like Herod, was also a weak man, whose marriage to Jezebel led him into doing wrong. Elijah’s condemnation of jezebel and of the worship of Baal led her to engineer having him killed.

This connection picked up later by Mark when Jesus observes “Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.”⁴

- Just as interesting is the story’s placement by Mark in-between Jesus’ sending of the twelve and their return before the feeding of the five thousand. And it is here, I think, this story is most instructive for us...

Last week, Susan Blaikie⁵ spoke of our call as God’s people to embody the Gospel to those around us – especially the poor and marginalised, those who especially who need the healing, restorative power of a touch from Jesus – even just a touch of his hem.⁶ Susan quoted my hero David Bosch, a South African missiologist, who wrote:

³ “The fact that Herod imprisoned John and beheaded him is confirmed by the Jewish historian Josephus, though details of the circumstances differ.” (Hooker, p.82)

⁴ Mk.9:12-13.

⁵ Wellington City Missioner.

⁶ Mk.5:25-34 (27).

We can fall into the trap of being a ‘church *for* the poor’ rather than ‘the church *of* the poor’...it is not so much of a case of the poor needing the church, but of the church needing the poor – if we wish to stay close to our poor Lord...the poor are not the *objects* of mission but its *agents* and *bearers*.⁷

This is very challenging stuff (whether we are talking of mission and ministry in Kelburn *or* beyond), especially since in a moment Iggy Menzies will present us with the findings of our parish review and how this might play out...

But the simple message of today’s passage is this: standing for the truth, will come at a *cost*... standing for the *Gospel* will come at a cost – especially when we challenge people with the Truth. It gets personal.

This is not just true for the Rosie Fyfes of this world or the persecuted church in some totalitarian state. It is true for us – *each* of us and *all* of us as a parish.

The Gospel is a lovely thing and “beautiful are the feet”⁸ that bring it. It is God’s power for liberation, reconciliation, renewal and joy. But there can be no proclamation of the Gospel, no witness to its truth, without it demanding something of us, just as it demanded everything from John, and our Lord...

⁷ See Susan’s sermon <http://stmichaels.org.nz/assets/pdfs/sermons/Gospel-response-to-poverty-part-2.pdf>

⁸ Rm.10:15.

The Gospel according to mark, chapter 6, verses 14 to 29

King Herod heard of [all that Jesus was doing], 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.

This is the Gospel of Christ!