

## Proper 10

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on Sunday 15 July 2018

*Readings: Ephesians 1 verses 3-14 and Mark 6 verses 14-29*

We meet a number of unpleasant people in the pages of the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Old Testament, just to name a few, Queen Jezebel, David's son Amnon, Goliath and some of those we meet in the book of Judges are hardly people we would enjoy meeting. But they have a curious fascination, as the baddies always do in films and stories. There are those who try to dismiss the Bible because of the difficulties and unpleasantness we find there; but the Bible wouldn't be an authentic account of why God weeps over the foolish and stubborn stupidity of humanity if we did not find, in its pages, many examples of that stupidity and evil – and God's righteous anger in the face of evil.

And we meet evil head on in today's gospel reading. Herod and Herodias. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Herod and Herodias are amongst the most self-centred and unpleasant people we meet in the Bible. Here are two people in power who were at the mercy of their drives and passions. Sadly, it's not difficult to think of modern-day parallels; but that's another story.

John the Baptist had done what so many prophets before him had done: speak truth to power. Think of Nathan shaming King David because he had ordered the killing of Uriah the Hittite so that he could take Uriah's beautiful wife, Bathsheba. Nathan tells David a story of a rich man taking the one little ewe lamb owned by a poor man. David is indignant – until he realises that Nathan is using the story to make David face up to his actions.

Herod was equally culpable. He had taken Herodias from his brother, to whom Herodias had been married. Herod had respect for John the Baptist – he 'feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man'. But Herodias had no such scruples: she 'had a grudge against [John], and wanted to kill him.' And she acted on her grudge in the most appalling way – demanding John's execution. Herod fell into a trap: he was delighting in Herodias' daughter's dancing and made the fatal mistake of offering her whatever she wanted in reward. It was the moment to execute revenge: Herodias and her daughter demanded John's execution. Herod could not lose face before his courtiers and officials, and the leaders of Galilee. He did not have the moral courage he needed at that moment and, notwithstanding his respect for John the Baptist, he ordered his summary execution. The grisly story of John's head being brought to Herodias on a platter has (not surprisingly) inspired many artists throughout history.

Herod shows us that actions have consequences; that the consequences of sin outlive what we expect. Killing John haunted Herod so much that when Jesus came preaching, his first thought was 'John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised' [from the dead]. Herod cannot avoid thinking about John and cannot shake off the deep feelings of guilt and shame. He knew he had done wrong, and his foolishness still tormented him. He is reminiscent of Joseph's brothers in the book Genesis, who, years after selling him into slavery, thought that any minor problem was punishment for what they had done.

Herod and Herodias. Two people with great power, who were at the mercy of their drives and passions: a grudge, with consequences out of all proportion; and lust and pride – leading to a brutal end without being checked by the proper exercise of moral courage.

Hans Christian Andersen's story, 'The Emperor's New Clothes', is another take on this same theme: only the innocent cry of a child can challenge the self-delusion of the powerful and the fawning adulation of the crowd. Why did Herod not think through the consequences? Why was there nobody amongst the courtiers brave enough to challenge their king? I suppose that the answer lies in justifiable fear, when we see that Herod was prepared to order John's execution.

Speaking truth to power is a noble and important task. In history, this was the role of the prophet or the clown or the court jester. And, sometimes, the priest.

In Shakespeare's plays, this is the role of the fool – whom we meet in many of his plays in different guises. In *King Lear*, the Fool is a servant and subject to punishment ('Take heed, sirrah - the whip') and yet Lear's relationship with his fool is one of friendship and dependency. The Fool acts as a commentator on events and is one of the characters who is fearless in speaking the truth. The Fool provides wit in this bleak play and speaks across the centuries. He ridicules Lear's actions and situation in such a way that audiences understand the point of his jokes. His 'mental eye' is acute: he sees Lear's daughters for what they are and has the foresight to see that Lear's actions will have disastrous consequences.

Where was Herod's fool, his court jester, when he needed him so much? And in the absence of such a person, where was Herod's conscience, his moral courage? This is an uncomfortable gospel reading, with much to say to those in power, in church and state, in industry and commerce. Cartoonists and satirists may sometimes overstep the mark, but we need to hear their critique of the powerful. In the Christian community, our complicity with slavery and racism, and our failure to stand up to and expose the evil of abuse are rightly the cause of deep and terrible shame. At the General Synod last weekend, I heard, in a private meeting, the stories of men and women who have suffered abuse. All I can say is that it was a deeply painful and uncomfortable experience.

John in his challenge to Herod. Nathan with King David. The Fool with King Lear.

I thank God for those who have the moral courage to speak truth to power in our generation; and I pray for them. Because so many of the saints who have shone the light of God's love and grace into the darkness of human sin have been martyrs. And that is no less true today.