

# The importance of the truth

Mark 6 v 14-29 - Littlebourne 18th July 2021

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Throughout Mark thus far, we've been reading about lakes, fishing boats, parables about fields and crops. Healings and yes arguments, sometimes heated, but nothing has got really violent. Next week, the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. For the most part, it's been pretty positive. But in between these more peaceful parts of Mark is this passage, the longest part of this gospel that doesn't include Jesus himself in the narrative.

Last week, Bernard talked about the sending out of the disciples. Next week's passage starts with their return to Jesus.

It's possible that today's passage is deliberately placed in the middle of the account of the apostles' mission. Whilst they are away, doing as Jesus commanded them, we get this flashback scene, to John's situation. Maybe this is what going on Jesus' mission will cost. Maybe serving God can lead to imprisonment and execution. Maybe speaking the truth that Jesus tells us to is dangerous.

## v14-16

*14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."*

"King Herod heard of it" - it, that is, that is referenced in the previous passage, which Bernard talked about last week, the sending out of the disciples, who (v13) "cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them."

Jesus' name had become well known to those who were possessed, those who were sick, and now it has reached royalty. The report concerning him has penetrated everywhere, but the question remained: "Who was he?"

Bear in mind, that Herod has seen closely John the Baptist's ministry - up till now, John has been the main player as far as Herod is concerned. Now that another has come whose ministry would have sounded to Herod to resemble much of John's ministry, but bigger and bolder, naturally this could be a continuation of what John was doing.

So some thought this was John the Baptist resurrected. Others say he was Elijah - Elijah the Old Testament prophet, who was whisked up into heaven rather than dying an ordinary death and was prophesised to come before the return of the Messiah. Or he is said to be a continuation of the long line of prophets, like Elijah and others, that have spanned the Old Testament history of Israel, or at least to be something like them in power or authority.

Who Jesus really is is the big question. Is he the messiah as people claim? Is he God come to Earth?

Herod stuck with his theory about Jesus being John come back from the dead. This would have been very worrying to Herod, because he had had John imprisoned and killed. Herod might now be expecting a resurrected John to come at him with more than just strong words.

## v17-18

*17 For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. 18 For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."*

Now we see the back story of Herod and John - a flashback to Herod's dealings with him. John had told Herod the truth and it had got him into hot water.

The Herod we're told about is Herod Antipas - tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Tetrarch means "ruler of a fourth part", because his father's kingdom was split in four by the Roman Emperor. He's the son of Herod the Great, who also appears in the gospels - he's the Herod that tried to have the new-born Jesus killed after hearing from the wise men of a new King who was born. Herod Antipas also appears later on, in Luke's gospel, as Jesus is brought before him on the night of his betrayal.

Now Herod had married his half-brother Philip's wife, Herodias. Herodias was also daughter of another of Herod Antipas' half-brothers, making her his half niece. Josephus, who wrote histories of the period, also tells us that Herod had divorced his first wife specifically in order to marry Herodias, after they met each other whilst in Rome.

John had pointed out to Herod - presumably in such a way as to mean that Herodias heard this too - that what Herod had done was wrong. It violated God's law, and Jewish ruler Herod should follow this law.

How many people would point out to such a ruler that he was doing wrong? Today, how many people would be willing to speak out about this sort of thing at all? People today might think that this was something that 'didn't hurt anyone' - the sort of sexual sin that the world often considers harmless. But John didn't think it was nothing to worry about.

John must have stood out in his condemnation of Herod's practices, because we see that he was imprisoned for it. Such is the potential price of telling the truth, especially to those powerful.

## v19-20

*19 And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.*

John's imprisonment was also a witness to his captor. The power of the word of God is that even when shut up in prison, it can prick the conscience. Herod "fears" John the Baptist while he lives, and is troubled about him after he dies. A friendless, solitary preacher, with no other weapon than God's truth, disturbs and terrifies a king.

## v21-29

*21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. 22 For when Herodias's daughter 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 to you." 23 And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." 24 And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." 25 And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 26 And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. 27 And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison 28 and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.*

John, the first human witness to Christ - remember when Mary, having been told she is going to birth by the angel Gabriel, then goes to see Elizabeth and her child, who we later see is John the Baptist, moves within her. Now John is the first Christian martyr. The word martyr comes from the Greek word μάρτυς (mar-toos) meaning a witness. Being a witness and a martyr are fundamentally linked.

So much does John's witness to the truth pain Herodias, that she finds an opportunity to kill him.

Herod wouldn't have expected that he would be asked for John's head - he was 'exceedingly sorry', but to keep the oath he had made in front of all the powerful people at his birthday party - nobles, military commanders and leading men - he grants the wish. He had vowed before witnesses, including people of importance and he did not want to lose face.

Scripture commends the making and keeping of lawful oaths and vows (Numbers 30), but that means also that there are some oaths and vows that we should not make or keep. A vow to sin is unlawful to begin with, and the only way of honouring God in such a circumstance is to break such an oath. But Herod saw his reputation before other men as more important. He therefore compromised the truth and had John killed anyway.

And it ends with John's disciples taking his body and laying it a tomb. John's execution anticipates that of Jesus' own. In both cases, the Roman authority is sympathetic to his prisoner, whom he regards as innocent; the death sentence is pronounced under outside pressure; and after death, the body is taken and laid in a tomb. Both innocent, suffering for the truth.

Of course, as we know, whilst John's death is the end of this story, Jesus' death was not the end of his.

What reward is there for telling the truth of God - not worldly riches, as we see from John's example. Like Paul, Peter and others, his testimony led to imprisonment. Like Stephen (Acts 7) and James (Acts 12), and plenty of others, his testimony led to his death.

Matthew 5 v 10-12:

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Notice that Jesus says we are blessed when we are those who are persecuted on his account - mirroring that of those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. The parallel between himself and righteousness is no mistake - it is when we imitate Christ that we are practicing righteousness and when we are persecuted for being Christlike, our reward is in heaven.

Thankfully, the best things for all Christians are yet to come. Our reward is beyond the grave.

Romans 8 v 18:

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*

Christianity doesn't promise to make our lives more comfortable, at least not in the short term. However, we look forward to a time when death is no longer a fear and suffering is no longer a fact of life.

## **Conclusion**

The truth matters. We've seen that John spoke the truth boldly when he talked to Herod and this cost him ultimately his life.

Herod heard the truth, but it didn't sink in - he did not repent of his sin that John was pointing out. Then when it came to being tricked into murdering John, the truth that John did not deserve it was overshadowed by his concerns for how he would look to those around him. He cared more for his reputation and power than for the truth.

Do we care more for what the world will think or what the world will do to us, than for the truth?

We don't know what the future holds, whether that means greater persecution for Christians who speak out or lesser. We should in any case speak truth boldly - we should be clear about what God says regarding right and wrong, sin and righteousness. Clear about the consequences of sin. And we need to be clear about what Herod was confused about - who Jesus is.