

Mark 6:14-29

This is a difficult story.

Mark has been telling us the gospel story of Jesus. I'm sure that as you have been looking at it over these past weeks you will have recognised Mark's eagerness to get the story told – it goes at a break neck speed – this happens and then Mark's favourite "immediately" this happens. We are mistaken if we think that it is a rushed and thoughtless telling of the story. Mark wants to tell us but each story and the order in which they are told is selected with care.

We have been learning about the parables – the lamp on a stand, the scattered seed, the mustard seed – and hearing of miracles – the calming of the storm – and healings - the demon-possessed man – Jairus's daughter – the women with the issue of blood. The crowds have gathered and followed Jesus. He has send the twelve out on the own and again there are healings. All seems to be going well – follow Jesus and everything will go great.

Then the story comes to what seems to be a shuddering halt as we hear that John the Baptist – Jesus' cousin – is brutally killed on what seems to be a whim. Mark wants to tell us that the gospel story is not a once upon a time fairy tale in which everything is wonderful – but one that is about the real world and about real life. As the mission of Jesus and his disciples went on John is killed in a horrific and cruel manner.

As we think about what happened lets first think about the characters

Firstly, there is Herod Antipas

The name "Herod" was almost like a family name; it meant "heroic" but there weren't any heroes amongst the lot of them. It can be confusing because no less than eight Roman rulers used the name Herod. This was Herod Antipater, whose nickname was Antipas.

He was one of the sons of the ruler who is often called Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the ruler when the wise men came asking, "Where is the one born King of the Jews." He was called great because he was a great builder, but he had a great capacity of hatred and violence as well. And as we know he attempted to kill the Jesus by ordering that all the male babies in Bethlehem be slaughtered.

We also know that Herod the Great was paranoid and jealous. He ordered the death of several of his wives and sons. The Jewish rabbis had an inside joke that it was safer to be Herod's pig than to be Herod's son and it is thought that he was plotting to murder this son Herod Antipas, when he himself died. So Herod Antipas was named the ruler of four small areas so he was called a Tetrarch. But he always wanted to be called a king. To be more like a king, Antipas married an older Arabian princess, the daughter of King Aretas IV. He married her for the royal connection.

Secondly, we have Herodias

Herodias was the Jezebel of the New Testament. Jezebel wanted the head of the prophet Elijah, but she wasn't successful. Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great. She visited Rome and met her uncle, Philip, the half-brother of Antipas. Philip wasn't in politics; he was a wealthy Roman businessman. Herodias seduced her much-older uncle Philip and they were married.

One day, Antipas left his Arabian princess-wife and visited his brother Philip in Rome. Herodias had grown tired of her husband, and there are different stories about who came on to who but she and Antipas, her brother-in-law, who was also her uncle, got together. In a scandal worthy of the Kardashians, Antipas and Herodias eloped back to Galilee. Antipas' Arabian princess had gotten word of the scandal, before her husband could return with his younger trophy mistress. They were never divorced; she just packed up and ran home to her father, who vowed to extract vengeance on his two-timing son-in-law.

Then we have Salome

This daughter of Herodias and Philip is not named in the Bible, but Josephus (a Roman historian) tells us her name was Salome. The really sad thing about Salome is the word used to describe her indicates that she was a very young teen or even a pre-teen. It was a word to describe a young girl not yet of marriageable age. And girls often married by the age of 16 in this time. The same word which is used to describe Salome had also been used to describe the daughter of Jairus who was twelve-years-old.

Finally, we have John

John the Baptist, as we know for the Christmas story is six months older than his cousin Jesus. Like Samson, John had taken a Nazarite vow and had never cut his hair or beard. He was a man of the wilderness and ate locusts and wild honey and wore a camel's hair as clothing.

This story has been the subject of hundreds of works of art. In one particular painting we see John the Baptist pointing his bony finger at Herod on the throne. Herod can't make eye contact. The two women are Herodias and her daughter. Let's learn a little more about each of these characters.

John had baptized Jesus even though he felt unworthy to do so. When they asked John if he was the Messiah he denied it. John's job was to introduce Jesus and then to move off the scene. In fact, in John 3:30, John said about Jesus, "He must increase, and I must decrease."

John, had publicly preached that it was both illegal and immoral for Herod to be sleeping with his niece and sister-in-law. This public disgrace infuriated Herodias

and she demanded that Herod kill him. Can't you just hear Herodias telling Herod, "You've got to do something to shut preacher up. Kill him, or I'm gone!"

But we are told that Herod feared John and believed him to be a righteous and holy man but to keep his wife happy, he arrested John and put him in jail. We know from Josephus that John was imprisoned in the desert fortress near Jericho. I'm told you can still visit the ruins today and still see the remains of the iron rungs in the wall where prisoners were chained.

The action of the story takes place at a birthday party.

It was Herod's birthday, so he would have invited his close friends and no doubt the rich and the powerful to the party. Herodias saw this as an opportunity to get what she wanted so she hatched a wicked plan. She knew the wine would be flowing and Herod had a weakness for dancing girls and was no doubt instrumental in getting Salome to dance for him.

The Bible says, "When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, 'Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you.' And he promised her with an oath, 'Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.'" (Mark 6:22-23) The funny thing about that was that Herod didn't have a kingdom to give her. He was the man who wanted to be king, but was only a provincial ruler over four districts. He was just bragging in front of his guests.

Salome ran back to her mother and said, "What should I ask for?" She was probably thinking maybe a pony or a doll. But her mother seized the opportunity and said, "Tell him you want the head of that Baptist preacher, John!"

We're told that, "At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: 'I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'" (Mark 6:25). This was not just about getting rid of him this was about revenge. John has humiliated her publicly - she was going to do the same.

I'm sure that Herod would have sobered up in a hurry. He was in a quandary. He knew what he thought about John, but he had made this promise in front of his guests. I wonder if he tried to negotiate with Salome. "Wouldn't you rather have horses, chariots, clothes, or jewelry?" I can just imagine Salome, wanting to please her mother saying, "I want his head on a platter, and I want it now!"

Herod had made an oath in front of his guests. He would lose face if he didn't keep his promise. So he decided it was better for John to lose his head than for him to lose face.

The Bible says, "So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a

platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb." (Mark 6:27-29)

So why is this story here why does Mark include it – what does he want us to know?

He introduces the story by telling us that when Herod heard about the miracles of Jesus, there was the thought that it was John the Baptist who had come back to life to haunt him. No doubt it would have kept him awake at night.

One of the key themes of Mark's gospel is about Jesus' identity – Mark want us to know who he is. Herod thought he was John, but John was dead – other thought it was Elijah or another of the prophets. That would have been difficult for Herod if he knew his Old Testament where often the prophets would be there to call the Kings and rulers to account. In his confusion Herod wonders whether John has been raised from the dead.

The prophets called the people to repentance, John great message was a baptism of repentance and forgiveness, the telling of the story is triggered by twelve goes out to preach repentance. Mark want us to know that at the heart of the gospel is the call to repentance. Herod knew there was something about what John was saying – there was some about John himself that meant that he struggled to deal with him and yet despite knowing that what he was saying was right he didn't act on it.

We can easily treat Jesus in the same way – we know who he is – we know what he says is right, but we do nothing about it – it makes no difference to our lives. The gospel of Jesus is about repentance and forgiveness and how often are we unrepentant and therefore unforgiven. Jesus desperately want us to know forgiveness. He wants us to bring to him all the stuff that we carry around with us that holds us back, that keeps us awake at night. Mark is saying Herod wouldn't make that step, but will you. Maybe this Lent time is an opportunity as we prepared for Easter to get some stuff sorted out, to bring it to God and seek his forgiveness.

The sad story of Herodias is that her rage at John was like a deadly infectious disease that destroyed her husband and daughter, it had destructive consequences on Antipas and her daughter. The fact is that our sin not only affects us, it affects those around us. It's like a pebble dropped in a pond. The ripples spread out and touch those around us.

Remember his scorned wife who returned to her father, the Arabian king? Two years after Jesus was crucified, the father of his ex-wife, King Aretas, attacked Antipas, slaughtered his soldiers and conquered his territory. In shame, Antipas and Herodias fled to Rome. Antipas' jealous nephew, Herod Agrippa, the brother of Herodias, had convinced the Emperor that Antipas was guilty of treason. So Antipas, the man who would be king, was stripped of his titles and property and was banished into exile in Gaul. The worst part of the punishment was that the wicked Herodias was sent with him, and they both died in obscurity and were buried in unmarked graves.

What's more is that history records that Salome's life was filled with tragedy. She moved back to Rome where she went through several failed marriages.

According to Roman historians, Salome died tragically when she was on holiday in the Alps. She and her party were crossing a frozen river when the ice cracked. In the efforts to extract her from the frozen water, a jagged piece of ice severed her head from her body.

This is all particularly tragic because they had the opportunity to go a different way and Mark want us all to know that we all have the same opportunity. John pointed to Jesus, the disciples witness to Jesus, and Jesus himself calls us to follow him. But we have to hear and respond. Not just in repentance but in following him, making that step of faith.

There's an old, old story about the time a crowd had gathered to watch a stunt man perform at Niagara Falls. It seems that the fellow had rigged up a wire from shore to shore, right across the falls, and was wowing the crowd by riding a bicycle along that wire. Back and forth he went, several times, and so, to make it more exciting, he asked the crowd if they believed he could make it across while carrying various things. First, he held up a suitcase and an umbrella, and asked, "Do you believe I can make it across the falls carrying these?" Since people had seen what he could do without anything in his hands, and it was pretty impressive, most of them shouted, "Yes, yes, we believe." Sure enough, he got all the way across and back with no trouble. Next, he picked up a violin and a bow, and asked the crowd, "Now do you believe I can ride my bike on this thin wire, across these falls, while I play my violin?" Again, they had seen incredible things, and so they shouted out again, "Yes, yes, we believe." It was just amazing to hear the music wafting out over the roaring waters of Niagara. He did it!

Finally the stunt man picked up a chair, and said, "Now I have just one more question. Do you believe I can put somebody in this chair and balance them on my bike and ride across the falls? Do you believe I can do this?" Well, the crowd went wild. They cheered, and they whistled. They stomped, and they shouted. "Sure. Yes. Go for it. We believe. We believe."

"All right," said he. "If you believe, I now need for one believer to step forward and sit in the chair." You can guess how many volunteers he got.

Mark want to tell us not to be like Herod, knowing the truth but doing nothing about it. But there does comes point when we can't just be part of the crowd, shouting from the side lines - we have to make the decision to get in the chair ourselves.

The final thing Mark want to tell us is that following him is far from easy. We live in a broken world in which bad things go on, sometimes really bad things, but it doesn't change anything as far as the gospel is concerned. We are to live by faith, not sight.

John the Baptist had pointed to Jesus and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) But after he was arrested and put in prison even he struggled with his doubts. In Luke 7 we read that John sent word to Jesus to ask Him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” We cannot be surprised that this had a few doubts when he was sitting in a tiny jail cell chained to the wall knowing that death was not far away.

Jesus sent word back to John to tell him that scripture was being fulfilled, miracles were being done, and lives were being changed. Notice Jesus didn't tell him off for doubt, he simply reinforced the evidence – the deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk and the good news is preached released – but more that that he tell his disciples that John was more than a prophet.

He said among men born of women (and that includes all of us), there is none greater than John.” Wow. Jesus was saying that of all the people in the Old Testament period, John was the greatest—greater than Abraham; greater than Moses; greater than Elijah.

John stood for the truth of his faith, and he ended up dying for his faith. The moment the whoosh of the sword removed his head from his body John was immediately transported into heaven into the presence of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As they welcomed this hero of the faith into heaven, I wonder if John smiled and thought, “Why did I ever doubt?”

He died an horrific death but it wasn't a pointless death and John's story doesn't end with death, but with life in eternity. It points us to the death of Jesus which is another great theme that runs through Mark's gospel. If you notice of the sixteen chapters from Chapter 8 Jesus is talking about his death and six chapters tell the story of his final week. And Mark is clear that the death of Jesus isn't a pointless defeat but one that brings forgiveness, healing and life in eternity.

Why does Mark include this difficult story. Because he want us to not to be like Herod and his family who missed out and he wants us follow Jesus, but know that following is costly.