

## Mistreated for Righteousness

Mark 6:14-29

<sup>14</sup> 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." <sup>15</sup> But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." <sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." <sup>19</sup> And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. <sup>22</sup> 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." <sup>23</sup> And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." <sup>24</sup> She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." <sup>25</sup> 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." <sup>26</sup> The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. <sup>27</sup> Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, <sup>28</sup> brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. <sup>29</sup> When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Is this a biblical tragedy? The dramatic character of the story of John the Baptist's death has almost guaranteed it would detract from the primary concern of this passage. Although it is little more than a story within *the* story, this potpourri of sexual lust, seduction, political ambition, scandal, and murder has provided endless inspiration for artists and writers ancient and modern. Titian, Caravaggio, and Gustave Moreau, among others, painted it; Oscar Wilde wrote a famous play about it (*Salome*) that Richard Strauss used as the basis of his very successful opera; Ken Russell and Billy Wilder incorporated it in films. Probably no aspect of the New Testament apart from the passion of the Christ has provided greater stimulation for the artistic imagination.

But is it a tragedy, in the classical Greek or even Shakespearean sense? The artists have usually made it seem so, but theology would raise questions on that score. Herod, the weak son of Herod the Great, although he is the main actor in the drama, seems too

little capable of the requisite self-knowledge to be thought a tragic figure. Herodias or Salome seems too much a pawn of her angry mother to be regarded as tragic. Perhaps Herodias, the mother, has a tragic aspect—we do not know enough about her story; yet vengeance is hardly a sufficiently elevated motive to be thought a "tragic flaw."

As for John, his vocation as truth teller as well as his ascetic lifestyle somehow place him above the tempest. And this is instructive, because it can be argued that tragedy is not a *biblical* concept. For the tradition of Jerusalem, after the fall: the rest—history as we understand it!—is just "fall-out." Suffering, not tragedy, is the human condition; but even suffering is not the last word about the subject, for where the grace of God enters the dismal, chaotic, and confused sphere of human striving and emotion, the outcome is always somehow "beyond tragedy."

The real theme of this scripture is not the drama of life and death, love and hate, that so easily captivates our imaginations; it is the confrontation of political power and prophetic faith. The great struggle is the struggle between the baptizer and the king. And it is a complicated tension because, far from being the usual battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness—light and dark, good and evil, are mixed *in both Herod and John the Baptist*.

That is obvious enough where Herod is concerned. He is by no means the standard villain. There is that within him—that "Augustinian" residue of remembrance and hope—that recognizes in the witness of John the kind of human authenticity to which he knew he was also called. The forces of self-aggrandizement and lust that are powerfully at work in his life—and all the more at work because he does not actually possess the secure power his office boasts—are nonetheless countered by a more ancient memory of the good. Like Paul, Herod too might well confess, "I find ... that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!" ([Rom. 7:21-24](#)).

But we do no service to biblical faith when we make John the Baptist, on the other hand, the example par excellence of pure goodness. Could it not be, as it has so often been with the heroes of morality, that his heroic self-discipline cloaks the sin of pride? And did Jesus perhaps understand that psychic ambiguity of his famous "cousin" when he sent John's disciples back to him with the enigmatic caveat, "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Matt. 11:5)?

What makes the encounter of the prophet and the king so poignant is that they understand each other well enough. The puppet king knew enough about truth to recognize his own falseness; and the prophet was sufficiently acquainted with temptation to desire his monarch's liberation from it. Their meeting could have been redemptive, but one great flaw prevented it: Herod's insatiable quest for preeminence—having it, keeping it, flaunting it. Lust for power is the problem this text illuminates.

Such power must resist truth—not only the small truths that reveal our small transgressions and guilty secrets, but the great truth that the claim to power itself hides, generation after generation, the truth. What prophetic faith wants above all to reveal is the absurdity of our pretence to sovereignty. **Douglas John Hall**

Consider the personal and social dilemmas in which Herod finds himself in this passage. He is trying to negotiate myriad complicated relationships within his household and society and discovering that it is quite difficult to please everyone around him and still uphold his own personal standards. He is at odds with his wife over John the Baptist and at odds with John over his wife. He is eager to appear a generous and trustworthy leader among Galilean society and troubled by his daughter's request for John's execution. His relationship with John evokes mixed feelings of fear, perplexity, and protectiveness. Herod is quite conscious of how social perceptions shape one's possibilities in life, yet he is also seeking some measure of truth by which to guide his life choices. He is caught in a web of relationships that seem to render him a "reactor" rather than an "actor" in the drama of life.

Most of us know what Herod was feeling because we have had such struggles at one time or another. One need not be Herod to understand what Herod is going through as his birthday festivities take an unexpected turn. Daily life also presents a series of Herod-like personal and spiritual dilemmas for persons to negotiate. For a harried mother of a toddler, there is the question of how best to love and parent a child in the face of a defiant "No!" and a full-fledged temper tantrum in aisle 6 of the grocery store at the end of a long day. For a father of three, it is the struggle to explain the importance of rearranging travel plans for a work trip so he can attend a Little League playoff game. A corporate executive wonders how her announcement of a long-awaited pregnancy will affect her employees' perceptions of her as an effective boss. A stay-at-home dad wrestles with the whispers of former colleagues that he just couldn't handle the pressures of work. Teenagers experience the angst of competing for acceptance in desirable social cliques, of serial broken hearts in the complex world of adolescent dating, of familial tensions over privileges and responsibilities. Younger children long for popular toys advertised on television, worry about parental fights and the potential (or actual) breakup of their families, and wonder if the trouble they have learning multiplication tables or basic grammar means they are stupid. Across the lifespan, persons question who they are and how they should act as life pushes and pulls them in conflicting directions. And as in the story of Herod's struggle, there are lives at stake as they decide which actions they will take.

The most obvious life at risk in the Mark text is that of John the Baptist. It is John who pays the ultimate price when Herod chooses to make the king's public image more important than regard for another man's life. The consequences of bad-faith actions are generally devastating for those most vulnerable to the vagaries of political decision making. Infants die when campaign promises to cut health-care expenses result in the closure of public health centers without alternative means for indigent care developed. On the other hand, many working families struggle to make ends meet when national

debt erodes the value of the dollar and drives up prices. If they cannot afford health insurance, their children are also vulnerable. Military alliances may draw soldiers into conflicts weakly supported at home, placing young people at risk because of promises made by their elders. Conversely, persons around the world may die as a result of nationalistic "ethnic cleansing" movements if the militaries of other countries do not intercede on their behalf. "Bad faith" decision making is easier to identify in the story of King Herod because we read this story in the context of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and know that Herod is making a mistake. The challenge of the twenty-first century is for the body of Christ to read our own decisions in light of that same story and ask ourselves whether the choices we are making are self-protective, or part of God's transformation of the world.

Herod too is at risk in this story. His spiritual quest is threatened by a decision that destroys further opportunity for conversation with John. His guilt over putting John to death leads him to imagine that Jesus, another emergent Jewish teacher, is John resurrected. Perhaps he fantasizes that he will have a second chance to listen to John's message of repentance and will finally understand and embrace the spiritual life John was proclaiming. Perhaps this is how human beings deal with our inclination to prefer social stability and equilibrium over the messy, chaotic process of personal and social transformation that participating in a spiritual quest requires. We look for second chances and hope that we are ready to risk more of ourselves this time around. **Karen Marie Yust**

Last of all we learn from this scripture that you may be working for righteousness, but you may not be accepted and appreciated. In last week's scripture Jesus was rejected in his own hometown. When the disciples were sent out two by two to proclaim the good news and bring healing Jesus had to give them instructions about rejection. John came preaching repentance because the promised one is coming, prepare his way, and he was rejected, imprisoned and eventually murdered. You have not been promised that all will

go as planned and you will a popular success. We have been given a task to do and our job is to be faithful. God is responsible for the increase and our salvation. He has promised that he will never leave us or forsake us...in that we can be sure!

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