

33 Mark 6:14-29

A Disastrous Success

Text

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." 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." 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.

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.

Introduction

Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The lives of kings has always been a fascinating read. In reality they are just the same as everyone else, just as depraved, no better and no worse. Kings are just like regular people who are growing up. What do I mean by that? Infants are regularly regarded as innocent, but nothing could be further from the truth. As they grow into the twos and threes is when most people really begin to notice their depravity. It is not as though the baby has had some drastic change of heart for the worse, it is that they are gaining an ever increasing capacity to act out on their depravity. Once they can walk, once they can speak, once they can climb, once they can use various household objects as missiles or clubs you realize that they are not innocent.

As they continue to grow, the adults and other kids realize that this cute little innocent baby now needs to be put in their place. Things begin to mellow out after 2 or three because the social pressure and punishment schemes are keeping things a bit more in check. However, once you have become king, it is like turning 2 all over again. There are new freedoms, new ways to act out and express what was in your heart all along. Without the authorities to punish you (you now are the authority) your heart begins plotting new ways to be depraved.

Background

This is why it is so fascinating to read about the lives of kings. Herod was no different. The Herods were no different. Here is a bit of that story which I will finish up at the end.

We begin with Herod the Great. He was so called largely because of his building projects. He was somewhat of a vassal king of Rome in Palestine. The Roman empire obviously conquered and controlled this land, but they granted Herod the title of king to rule and keep things in order. Herod the Great lived from 73-4BC. He had no less than ten wives.

To make things really confusing, everyone is named Herod. Wife number four, whose name was Mathace, gave birth to Herod Antipas. Herod the Great's third wife, Miriamne II gave birth to Herod Phillip I. Herod the Great and Miriamne I have a son named Aristobulus. Aristobulus and his wife have Herodias, a girl Herod. Herodias then married Herod Phillip I, Aristobulus' half brother. Herod Antipas marries the daughter of an Arabian King, finally someone outside of the family. Well that didn't last long.

Herodias and Herod Phillip had a child named Solome. But Herod Antipas and Herodias had eyes for each other. Herod Antipas divorced his wife and Herodias dumped Herod Phillip and the two of them got married. Solome, Herod Antipas' niece does a dance for him which apparently pleases him very much. One needs to imagine what kind of a dance this girl did for her uncle. What a sordid affair! Divorce, polygamy and incest run rampant in the Herod family. It is to all of this, and particularly the marriage of Antipas and Herodias that John the Baptist condemns him. With that background in place, let us take a step back and look at the text again.

A Sober Structure

What is the significance of this story here? This is sandwiched in between the sending of the 12 and the return of the 12. Once again we are reminded that this kingdom will not be without difficulties. This kingdom will not be without trials. The imprisonment and death of John the Baptist, the herald of Christ, provides the meat of this evangelism sandwich.

The kingdom of God was, and continues in our day, to be misunderstood. It is a kingdom of warfare. It is a militant kingdom. We are ambassadors in peril. We are soldiers on the front lines. Discipleship is not for the faint of heart. Discipleship will mean persecution and difficulties. It will mean taking up one's cross daily. It will mean dying to self and possibly dying a martyr's death.

Each of these disciples who have been sent out on a mission, excepting John, will die a martyr's death just like John the Baptist. The structuring is strong and obvious in its intention to convey tribulation in the commission.

The disciples were sent out proclaiming repentance and they returned with good news. It was a success! But at what cost? In the midst of this kingdom success was the murder of John the Baptist. One of the greatest preachers and prophets every to walk the face of this earth has been cut down. Better than Moses? Yes. Better than David? Yes. Better than Jeremiah? Better than Isaiah? Yes. Second only to the incarnate Son of God! From a human perspective, what a loss! What a loss to the cause of the kingdom!

Identity Speculations

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."

From the beginning of this series in Mark we have been keen on answering the question, "Who is Jesus." In these verses we have a glimpse of what the popular crowd thought of Jesus. There are three reports given here.

First, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. John, as we have seen was an immensely popular figure in his own right. His ministry was very closely related to Jesus' since he was Jesus' herald. The kingdom proclamation that John proclaimed was the same kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. The call of repentance to make the paths straight continued to be the call of Jesus and his disciples. John did no miracles during his ministry, but it appears that the people believed that being raised from the dead, having come from the great beyond, he may have brought some powers from the great beyond. Obviously this was a popular understanding and not the understanding of anyone who had great interest in either John or Jesus. The interested followers would have known that Jesus and John were contemporaries, in fact that John baptized Jesus.

The second opinion was that Jesus was Elijah. Elijah was widely regarded as a powerful prophet who would come again before the dawning of the kingdom, before the coming of God. There were massive eschatological implications for Jesus being Elijah. By the way, these categories were not necessarily distinct categories. John himself was regarded as Elijah. Thus there is some possible overlap in believing that Jesus was John or Elijah.

Finally, some people thought he was a prophet like the prophets of old. Again there is some overlap here because both Elijah and John were prophets. The sense here seems to be that Jesus is certainly from God, he is a prophet. They may not be able to identify any particular prophet, but Jesus is certainly a prophet.

In all of this I find it remarkable what people do not say Jesus is. Just this week I saw someone refer to Jesus as, "an illiterate Jewish peasant/carpenter/simple preacher man who suffered from hallucinations." It is popular for people to regard Jesus as a good moral teacher. But that is not mentioned. For everyone who lived at that time there was no question regarding the extraordinary power and authority of Jesus. An explanation had to be made for it. As C.S. Lewis said, Jesus simply did not leave that option open to us.

Herod, out of a troubled conscience regarding his murder of John the Baptist believes the first report to be the truth. Even Herod Antipas the Tetrarch must come to an opinion regarding Jesus Christ. He is too colossal of a figure to ignore.

A Seared Conscience

Verse 17 on is a digression on verses 14-16. It is a purposeful and carefully structured digression as we have seen. The family of Herod, as we have seen is a work. I have not shared half of the depravity that is recorded about this family. There are additional incestuous relationships, father's murdering sons, infanticide and more. John the Baptist is a righteous man. He is a prophet of God who is a bold witness. Cruel and powerful though he was, Herod was not beyond reproof from this prophet of God. Naturally, this does not go over well, especially with Herodias. Exposed sins never go over well do they? Our pride gets in the way. Would that we could follow the way of the wise.

Proverbs 9:9 Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.

Proverbs 15:5 A fool despises his father's instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is prudent.

Herod and Herodias could not let this offense go unpunished. Herodias especially hated John. The fact that he called her on the floor was enough in her mind to justify his murder; her conscience is completely seared. Herod, on the other hand seems to have been a bit of a basket case regarding John.

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.

But why should Herod fear John? I think that there are two senses in which Herod feared John. Josephus states in his *Antiquities* that Herod imprisoned John for fear of an uprising. John was getting a very large following. And when a man with a very large following begins to speak out against you as the ruler of that region, there may be reason to fear. That may be true, but it doesn't seem to do justice to all the evidence.

Herod knew John to be a righteous man and therefore was probably not too worried that John had ambitions for the throne. John was not a threat to his throne, but he was a threat to his way of life. How many preachers are there now that strike fear into the heart of politicians? How many preachers who have such a passion for righteousness and have no fear of man, and have a personal righteousness to back up their preaching? John was an amazing man!

Mark also says that Herod imprisoned John to keep him safe. More than likely what happened was that Herodias was furious with John and people probably knew it. It would only be a matter of time before John met with some untimely death due to the scheming of Herodias. But if John were to meet with such ill fate, his followers may rise up. It is therefore likely that Herod imprisoned John to keep him safe from Herodias so that there would be no murder and therefore no uprising. It was a compromise position. Imprisoning him would make Herodias happy while not being so drastic that an uprising would ensue.

Herod knew not only that John was innocent of any crime, but that he was an exceptionally righteous man. Herod, it seems, had a certain respect for John. John was a man of tremendous character and courage. Both were things that Herod lacked. Herod was right to be impressed by John, for Jesus said that there was none born of women that was greater than John!

Herod feared John. Yet he kept him safe. He was greatly perplexed by John, but he heard him gladly. There was a kind of love-hate relationship here. There was a deep admiration of but

uneasiness with John and his teaching. This passionate straight-shooter told it as it was yet with the utmost of humility and character.

A Seductive Success

Although Herod intended to protect John and pacify his wife, it didn't work.

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.

An opportunity for what? To kill John of course. This tips us off that this whole affair was not just some lucky event, but was a plan hatched by Herodias for dispatching of John. Herod throws a birthday party, and everyone who is anyone is there. There were his nobles, there were leading men in Galilee. These were probably the leaders of industry, high ranking rulers, etc. The military commanders were chiliarchs, literally commanders of a thousand. The who's who of Palestine has assembled for this occasion.

22 For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced,

Josephus says that Salome, Herodias' daughter, was in her mid teens. Herodias uses her own daughter to seduce her husband. The wine has been flowing and the men are feeling good. At this point Salome enters in and dances a provocative, sensual dance for the sole purpose of pleasing her uncle/step-father. How twisted is that?

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."

Full of wine and beguiled by his seductively dancing niece, Herod is feeling generous. He wants to reward this kind of show. But he doesn't merely reward, he goes a step farther and vows a reward. "Up to half my kingdom!" he says. This should not be taken literally because 1) he had no power to give away his realm since it really belonged to Rome 2) it was a common saying which meant simply that they could ask for something big.

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."

Now, at this point Herod has a decision to make. One commentator has noted that he could have said, "I promised you a gift, not a crime." Or, "I promised you a gift, not your mother." He made a rash vow, but he should have had sense enough to know that vows which commit you to illegal activities are not binding vows. He should have set the matter straight.

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.

Because of fear of men and because of a misplaced understanding of vows, he fulfills her request. When John's disciples heard of it they come and took his body and gave him a proper burial. Herodias found a way to make it happen. She saw an opportunity in this party and she took full advantage of it. Would that we could be so determined and clever on doing good and in advancing the kingdom of God.

The structuring of this text sets the disastrous loss of John the Baptist in the midst of a successful kingdom proclamation by the disciples. But we should also see that the success here was not merely with the disciples, but with John himself. John has proclaimed the coming of the kingdom with a passion and a boldness that made kings shake in their boots. When Jesus came into public ministry John pointed people to him. Although John died a terrible death, his life was an enormous success in the eyes of God. When John returned home, throngs of angels ushered him into the presence of God almighty where he heard the words, "Well done my good and faithful servant."

That is the exact kind of ministry we should have as well. We need to have a ministry of invisibility. When people look at us they should see Christ. Though from an outward standpoint things may look grim, if we persevere in faithfulness we too will receive commendation from God for a life of faithfulness.