

Jesus once described his cousin John as "...of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist." John's death struck me as pointless when I first read this, and that made me wonder what God was saying.

Slowly through the week, and in the study group on Wednesday morning it became clearer to me that when you take the story apart it is a study in how we deal with the ups and downs of life, the pull of evil and of grace.

We begin with the slur against the marriage

Herod was the son of Herod "the Great" who slaughtered all the boys under three in order to kill the Star-Foretold King. That was the house he grew up in, and the family-values of his Dad. Our Herod gets just a third of the old kingdom and his brothers each get a bit too. So the not-so-great Herod recently married his brother Phillip's wife. Phillip not being dead, this is adultery and against Jewish law. He knew it was but, being in power, he thought everyone might just say nothing. John the Baptist simply stated what everyone knew. The thing about being King, even a little one, is that you get to do whatever you like. Isn't it? So Herod, a few years or months earlier, flattered by the attention of his older brother's wife, or caught up by his desire for her, had to make a decision.

Pause for a moment. How often have you chosen to do something or to get something because you want it, in order to fulfill a greater and more glorious self-image? "You know you're worth it!" says the advert. Mike's house is so much bigger than ours... Wouldn't I look cool if... I can have another drink if I want to! And you know there will be repercussions, and others may end up paying.

Pause again. John the Baptist, greatest ever guy, sees his disciples leaving him to follow Jesus. He sees "his fans" moving on to the "new kid in town". John has held the centre of attention in Judaism and now Jesus is. His self-image and his actual image are probably in painful separation from each other. John says "I must grow less so that he may grow greater." When have you let someone else hold the floor at a party when you think you could say it better? When did you step back to let someone else shine? When have you, knowing that someone has not done it "right" by your standards, said "well done!" to them, knowing they tried their best?

Pause again and look at Herodias. She is, in my imagination, like one of the trophy wives of the old TV show Dallas. She married into power. Perhaps she is afraid of losing her hold to a younger, prettier wife in a few years. She is already on husband #2. She holds John's commentary on her marriage as a denial of her status. Whether John was stating Jewish law or attacking her directly, she has taken him as a sworn enemy.

When have you done this? We make sudden sweeping declarations. "I'll never speak to that man again!" "Never trust a Viking!" is one of my favourites. "Jane is selfish and cruel!" "That priest is a complete hypocrite" We put someone into a category called "enemy". It is a dark dungeon of the soul from which there is rarely any escape. Jews or Muslims, Homosexuals, Immigrants, Bankers, Street People, Bikers, Communists, the list of the damned go on.

Jesus was accused of welcoming sinners, the damned, and eating with them. When have you crossed a room to talk to someone you felt deeply uncomfortable with? When did you chose to open the doors of your dungeon and let your condemned folks out? When did you go against your family's rules and make friends with one of the unacceptable people?

The second moment is the oath to the girl and her request for a murder.

Herod has said something stupid. He said it publicly. He said it in front of people who he was hoping to impress. What do you do? What should you do? What have you done in moments like this?

This, to me, is the sad part of the story. Herod has arrested John because of his wife. But also because he knows John has something he needs. John's whole message was that you had to face all the failures, mess-ups and short-falls in living below the standard God asks of you. You have to confess it all, get washed clean by grace and start fresh and in love with God again. Who would need this more than Herod? He knew his childhood and his family's power was all mixed up with violence, collusion with the enemy, and a fear/control relationship with his own people. He wanted to be at peace with God. Honestly, who does not? Some pretend not to because they sense they are too far from God to ever get back, but John turned no one away. God turns no one away. Herod would go down to the cells and talk with John. He was drawn to this man of God. But he would come away perplexed.

"Perplexed" here I think may mean, "I know what you are saying, but I have no idea how I can do that." For Herod it might mean abdicating, giving away his wealth and offering to work with lepers for the rest of his life. Well, really! With a country to run and a dysfunctional family to answer to, and a mortgage to pay and school fees and the payments on the car and what kind of a place would I be asking the family to live in? etc etc. Well, it is easy to get perplexed. The more you have the harder it is to follow Jesus. (Easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than to get a rich man into the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus joked, or just noticed.)

Here we find ourselves again. "Not now, or not yet Jesus" we say. I'll stop that when I retire. I'll care for the poor when I have this much saved. I will be your disciple as long as I don't have to give up too much. I'll stop bossing people around when they get it right. I will give myself to you, Lord, when I am free to do so.

People come to Church Sunday by Sunday, but seem deaf to the words of God. Their lives don't seem ever to change! They are not deaf. That's not it. It is hard to follow. Someone once said of Christianity that it has not been tried and found to fail. It has hardly ever been tried!

Like Herod, we come, and we listen, and we leave perplexed.

All of what I have said could be described as the life-long work of being caught between evil and grace. These are like strong currents running in opposite directions in water. We wade through the water, sometimes shallow and sometimes chest deep, and we feel the pull. We set our eyes on a spot on the far shore, and strive for it. Often we think we will never get there. Sometimes we get carried by grace, and sometimes we get pulled by sin.

The fact is that there is no escape from either. God will never let you go. If you hide in Hell God is there also, healing and holding you in love. If you ascend in to some available heaven the pull of evil will follow you even there, with its tendency to make enemies, self-doubt, and suspicions.

This story of John the Baptist's death is here in the Gospel because it is actually vitally important. It is a teaching for anyone who seriously wants to live the New Life of Christ, following his teachings, trying to walk their life in his way. We all have a bit of Herod in us. We all have a bit of his new wife. And we all have a bit of John the Baptist in us. And when we receive communion we have a bit more of Jesus in us.

The work of living a spiritual life is the work of noticing which one you are following at any instance. Noticing, pausing and deciding who you deeply want to follow.

Then, then you have to actually follow. Even if slowly.