

There are a couple of excuses, among many (I might add), that I've heard why people don't read the Bible or why we shouldn't read it – that it's boring and that it is inaccessible to us because it deals with situations and times that have no bearing on the way we live our life today. Well neither excuse could be seriously used in relation to our Gospel reading today. What could be less boring than this scene played out from the Gospel of Mark this morning? You could be excused if you thought today's reading came straight from the pages of a ripping political thriller novel, or from the script of a political drama like *Mad Men* or *Game of Thrones*. Our passage is full of political intrigue, it's full of violence and a just a hint of sex – probably not enough for HBO though! It has all the pieces to make a great drama. First there is John, the wild haired, camel shirted wilderness preacher challenging the authorities over Torah observance. Secondly there is Herod, the corrupt and nervous leader who has John arrested, but is not strong enough or confident enough to have John executed, because Herod knew he was a righteous man, and he feared him and what would happen if he did. Thirdly you have the scandal: Herod had married his sister-in-law, which was strictly forbidden under Jewish religious law. Next you have the schemer behind the scenes: Herodias, Herod's wife plotting to have John executed and using her lecherous husband's weakness for young pretty girls – even his own daughter! – to get exactly what she wants. Finally you have the trap: Herod is caught between keeping his oath sworn before the court and his fear and reverence for John, and although he is deeply grieved by the decision he chooses to execute him. Exciting stuff! Grim yes, but certainly not boring.

And it certainly isn't inaccessible. While we might like think that this sort of political intrigue and scheming is relegated to history, or fiction or at the very least somewhere else in the world, the reality is that it probably hits much closer to home than we'd like to admit. Recently the *Washington Post* quoted a lavishly paid lobbyist who said: "There are two engines that drive Washington: One is greed, and the other is fear." Greed and fear are the root of much of the scheming and intrigue in the world. While in Canada, we often like to think of ourselves as better than our neighbours to the south, the truth is the very same thing can likely be said about our own politicians and power brokers. You need only to look at the scandals and court cases surrounding the Prime Ministers aides, senators or how the current government has done little to foster cooperation to realize that intrigue is never far off, even if our leaders are not able to imprison and behead people for speaking out against them, but even that is changing with recent passing of Bill C-51, the government has greater and greater power to detain without charging. There is always temptation when one has power, temptation to use it for your own ends, temptation to help your friends, the temptation that you and you alone are able to see things clearly enough to make a better future. The temptations of power and politics are ageless, and the lessons learned cut across the generations. What the Bible teaches us about the way the world is, and how God's people respond is as pertinent today as it was at the time of Jesus.

And so we come back to our biblical thriller. John the Baptist, we know was a wilderness preacher that was calling the nation of Israel to repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord. As part of that prophetic calling John saw it as his duty to challenge the powers of Israel to do the same, to live righteous and upright lives, to live according to the Torah, the law which the Kings of Israel were meant to uphold and defend. John was speaking the truth to the powerful of Israel, he was holding, he was calling all of Israel to return to its covenant with God, to return in repentance and thanksgiving to God so that they might experience abundant life.

This is what true prophecy is. So often we think of prophecy as the gift of predicting the future, of discerning events that are to come, but true thrust of Biblical prophecy, is truth telling. It is the telling of hard truths that people, particularly people in positions of power, don't want to hear. It is the act of calling people to renewed faithfulness and trust in God. It is holding the powers of this world accountable to something greater, holding them accountable to the mercy and love of God.

In his letters to the Corinthians and the Ephesians Paul speaks of prophecy as an individual spiritual gift, and it certainly is one, but it is also a gift that God gives to his Church, that God gives to us here and now. The Church is called to use its prophetic voice, to challenge the political structures and powers that oppress, that pollute, that exploit. The Church is called to stand up like John the Baptist and hold our leaders to account, challenge them to follow a righteous path, a path that leads to abundant life for all, rather than for a select few.

God calls the Church here in Canada to hold the government accountable on matters of the environment, fair wages, immigration, social housing you name it, the Church needs to be a voice crying out in the metaphorical wilderness, it needs to be a voice that challenges the current landscape of politics and economics, and offers an alternative vision for what the world could be.

We have witnessed this recently with the ecumenical movement surrounding the Truth and Reconciliation movement and holding ourselves and the government accountable for the legacy of the Residential Schools. Just last Sunday there was a massive rally in Toronto where numerous Christian groups joined with others in the March for Jobs, Justice and Climate to challenge the government to change their policies on climate change and our dependence on fossil fuels. But these are just the tip of the iceberg, we as a Church, both here as a congregation in Scarborough and as the body of Christ throughout Canada and the world need to raise our prophetic voices.

Our gospel story today reminds us that following the living God, following Jesus, is inherently political. We cannot separate our religion and politics as people so often say we should, because the prophetic voice of God will always come up against the empires of this world, the powers and principalities which rule our cities and nations. If we believe that God loves each person, that he created us all in his image, than we should not be able to abide politics and economics which create tiers of citizenship. If we believe that God created this good earth, with resources for all to share, and called us to be stewards of it then we should not be able to live with politicians and businesses that insist upon polluting and damaging this world beyond repair.

Our story also reminds us that there will be consequences if the Church takes its prophetic role seriously. John was imprisoned and then executed because he dared to speak truth to power, because he dared to offer a different vision of the world that challenged the authority and the prestige of the ruling powers of Israel. Prophecy is a dangerous business, speaking up and challenging the powerful risks retaliation. The gospel writer doesn't mince words, living out the prophetic calling will result in conflict, will result in conflict with forces and people more powerful than ourselves. There are countless examples of this throughout our recent history. The willingness of those in the Civil Rights movement to stand up to racism and segregation, despite the threats, abuse and assassinations, or Oscar Romero. More recently we have seen the courage and steadfastness of the African American Churches to challenge the ongoing racial discrimination and violence in America even in the wake of the shooting at Mother Emmanuel Church and the subsequent arson at almost a dozen black churches. Here in Canada, Churches and religious organizations like KAIROS, which have been critical of the Canadian Government's stances on issues ranging from climate change to aboriginal rights, have experienced greater government scrutiny and sometimes the stripping of their charitable status. In spite of the threats, the torments, the powerful fighting back God's truth is proclaimed and the powerful are held to account.

And so like John the Baptist before us, we as the Church are called to be a prophetic voice here in our time. But what does that mean for us today? Well to start with it means that we need to prayerfully consider who we want our politicians to be, to hold up the lens of Christ to them and make decisions based upon that. It means contacting your MPs, MPPs, and city councillors and letting them know about how you feel about issues that matter to you on account of your faith. It means taking stock of our own lives to see where we might need to change what our spending habits are like for example. It means supporting initiatives and organizations which have the expertise and wherewithal to provide a strong and clear voice to the powerful in our society.

We may face hardship in all of this, we will certainly face challenge and opposition – that is the way of the prophet. But in following Jesus we have a glimpse of a better future, we have a glimpse and a taste of abundant and eternal life. This glimpse and taste of the life in the presence of God is what makes our prophetic voice possible, is what can make the challenges and obstacles not only bearable but surmountable. After all with God all things are possible.

Amen