The Skull and the Kingdom

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Once upon a time, Jacques Mallet du Pan said: “La révolution dévore ses enfants.” *The revolution eats its children.* And revolutions very often devour their own, as we saw throughout the last century and as we see today. The establishment also eats its own. Consider the work of Lu Xun (魯).In “A Madman’s Diary” (狂人日記)—whenever the man reads history or classical texts, he sees the words “吃人!” “Eat people!” appear between the lines. And we have also seen this metaphorical cannibalism in ancient and recent history; it is the dark matter we encounter in our gospel reading today: “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. 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.’ But others said, ‘It is Elijah.’ And others said, ‘It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’ But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’” (Mark 6:13-16). The beheading took place at a dinner party. It is shocking to us, but it might not have been that shocking to Herod and his noble guests. Romans liked watching executions, and their theatre was full of both real and imaginary bloodshed. The Roman world was even familiar with grim stories of dinner parties. In the play *Thyestes* by Seneca, Atreus feeds his brother Thyestes a banquet of meat taken from Thyestes’ own sons as revenge for the adultery Thyestes had committed with Aerope, the wife of Atreus. Seneca was a contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth and Paul of Tarsus. Though the myth was ancient, the play was possibly written to speak of the metaphorically cannibalistic forces that devour innocent lives in the world of politics. The Julio-Claudian dynasty of emperors were masters at eating their own (cf. Tom Holland, *Dynasty.* London: Abacus, 2015). And they were a dynasty that began as a revolution that overthrew the traditional way of Roman life. The gospel story today poses heavy questions for us. There are five characters in the narrative that help us look at what strength and weakness, power and bondage mean in the light of the good news.

The king and the queen are in positions of power. They allow that power to become sources of harm. Herod has already imprisoned John the Baptist because John spoke out against his unlawful marriage to Herodias. As Mark relates: “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. For John had been telling Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 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” (Mark 6:17-20). Herod and Herodias represent a lethal combination of corrupt character and power—almost prototypes for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Herod lacks the moral strength to ignore his wife’s grudge; Herodias lacks the moral strength to hear John the Baptist. Both are in positions of power, and both use their power for wickedness—Herod, by imprisoning John, and Herodias, by later manipulating Herod and managing to get John executed. Herod even likes listening to the preaching of John, but he cannot submit to it; he will not submit to the word of God. Remember that John the Baptist is not in prison for a political statement; politics may be involved, and John may be a type of political prisoner, but it is not for a political statement that John is in prison. John the Baptist confronted the *immorality* of the Herodians. And indeed, they were severely immoral. Like the Julio-Claudians, their marriages and relationships were atrocious. Herodias was Herod’s niece; Salome—if that is indeed the one who dances—is the daughter of his niece who will later marry his half-brother (Lawrence Mykytiuk., “Herod the Great and the Herodian Family Tree”, *Biblical Archaeology,* December 6th, 2020. <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/herod-the-great-herodian-family-tree/>). The injustice we witness at the dinner party is born from a maelstrom of disordered desire, weakness, vengeance and a deafness to the word of God. Herodias and Herod have tried to bury the messenger of the word of God in prison. Injustice is not born in a vacuum. Every kind of political and economic structure in history has had injustice, some certainly more than others. There has never been a nation, kingdom, empire or people free of it. Injustice is born of immorality and resistance to the word of God. The strong, the powerful, have a choice—but in the gospels we see the Herodian family constantly at war with God. Herod the Great slaughtered the children of Bethlehem when Christ was born; Herod Antipas executed John the Baptist and would hand the Lord Jesus over to Pilate to be crucified. The Herodians would continue to collaborate with the Romans for another seven decades before their family disappears from history; there were no long-range benefits to their politics. After the first century, the kingdom would cease to exist altogether.

Our story also has characters who are weak—people who are not in great positions of power. John the Baptist has followers, but his movement has no power to protect him from Herod; the daughter of Herodias has some privilege associated with being a princess—but she seems highly dependent on the machinations of her mother. One aspect of John’s weakness was not knowing if his mission was bearing fruit. If indeed he was imprisoned at the Machareus fortress east of the Jordan (Győző Vörös, “Machareus: Where Salome Danced and John the Baptist was Beheaded”, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 38:5, September/October 2012), then he was far from the budding ministry of Jesus. And thus, we read in the gospels: “Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’” (Matthew 11:1-6). Modern people are addicted to being informed and misinformed; it is hard for us to imagine the 1st Century, when news traveled slowly; it is hard to imagine the vulnerability, psychologically and practically, this would have created for John. Faith was his only option. Salome is also in prison, however. One cannot read the history of Roman emperors, nobles, and client kingdoms and assume that young women had anything like self-determination in their lives. As demonstrated vividly in this story, they were pawns in a sickening game of temptation and seduction and the acquisition of power: “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.’ And he solemnly swore to her, ‘Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.’ She went out and said to her mother, ‘What should I ask for?’ She replied, ‘The head of John the baptizer.’ 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.’” (Mark 6:22-25). Salome does not even know what to ask for. Compare her words with the words of Jesus when he meets blind Bartimaeus: “Then Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well.’” (Mark 10:51-52). *What should I ask for? What do you want me to do for you?* Instead of half the kingdom, Salome gets the head of a prophet—the prophet who spoke out against the very forces that imprison her. A skull instead of a kingdom. The returns on our investments in sin are meager. Sin does not pay out good dividends whatsoever. And it is here we begin to see that everyone is in imprison here. Herod is imprisoned by his lust and weakness; Herodias is imprisoned by her thirst for vengeance; Salome is imprisoned by aristocratic social norms and imperial politics, but also by her own ignorance and lostness. John is the only one who seems free; John is not really in prison—he is completing the journey he undertook willingly. As we read in the gospel of John: “After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized— John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. Now a discussion about purification arose between John’s disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.’ John answered, ‘No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, “I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.” He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.’” (John 3:22-30). And indeed, John was the forerunner of Jesus—not just in preaching a message of repentance, but in his utter humility, in giving up his life for the truth.

In our world, there will always be injustice, poverty, bondage, prisons, cruelty—some moments more than others—and there will always be those who find themselves in positions of greater or lesser strength and power, and some who will find themselves in greater or lesser weakness, vulnerability and dependence. Where are you today, and how do you deal with your power or your weakness? Would you prefer half the kingdom or would you prefer a head on a platter? It is a strange and horrible question, but consider the proportions. The death of John the Baptist asks us this question today. What do you want? Despite being weak, John was strong—for he knew His God and he did not abandon the word of God. Despite being strong, Herod and Herodias were weakened by their own sin and their deafness to God. And despite being weak and strong, Salome was lost because she allowed history to swirl around her like its own dance in which she had no part, no decision to make. The truth is she could have shown mercy and asked for the release of John the Baptist—for a moment, Herod was entirely in her power—but she gave that power to her mother and the moment was lost forever. Salome failed, in some way, to be an individual before God (cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*). She is the true picture of despair. And in the end, she has nothing—no skull, no earthly kingdom, no kingdom of heaven. Most of us are no different, actually—instead of seeking a kingdom, we are content with a skull.

There is a fifth character in this story—a character on the edge. The whole reason we learn of the death of John the Baptist is that Jesus has begun a ministry that is somehow reminiscent of the prophet, while being different. John the Baptist preached the word of God; Herod, Herodias and Salome conspired to blot him out. It is a grotesque atrocity, a seemingly unforgiveable injustice. The way Jesus reacts to this incident is illuminating: “When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb. The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.’ But he answered them, ‘You give them something to eat.’” (Mark 6:29-37). I am not sure how much time elapsed between the beheading of John and the feeding of the five thousand—but Mark seems to have constructed his gospel with the intention of contrasting the two events. There are two very different banquets happening. Beside the atrocity at the Herodian fortress, we see the blessing of the people in the wilderness. Maimonides listed 8 levels of justice and righteousness—and all involve *giving*. Jesus fulfills the image of justice and righteousness in feeding the five thousand. Righteousness and justice are born from true charity, which is giving of ourselves. Jesus saw the sheep without a shepherd, and he shepherded them; he taught them and fed them; and he commanded his disciples to feed them. The sheep have to be fed; the sheep have to be led, drawn by the compassion and wisdom of the Lord. The kingdom of heaven does not eat its own children; it feeds them hope and redemption. That is what love and justice look like.