

Last week, I spent much of the homily explaining how Mark maps the major stories of Jesus' earthly life to the yearly liturgical pattern of worship in the synagogue. This week in our reading from Mark, we focus both on the connection between synagogue worship and Jesus stories and on a connection between the mission and ministry of John the Baptist and that of Jesus. As I mentioned last week, in Mark there is neither a nativity story nor are there stories of Jesus childhood. Mark's Gospel begins with the Proclamation of John the Baptist *Prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight*. In a time when only the very rich could afford books or scrolls, people only heard scripture read in the synagogue. Those who worshipped in the synagogue would immediately have heard the connection between John's proclamation as reported by Mark with *A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. From Isaiah 40 verse 3. In Mark, John was described Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. Echoing something synagogue goers would immediately have recognized as a description of Elijah A hairy man with a leather belt around his waist." 2 Kings 1:8 Elijah was always believed to be the one who would announce the arrival of the Messiah. Also please do not forget the Elijah was also one of only 3 who bodily ascended into heaven. Elijah returns in person in Mark's Gospel in the story of the Transfiguration in Chapter 9. John's proclamation which begins Chapter 1 is immediately followed by John baptizing Jesus. John the Baptist returns to Mark's Gospel in our reading this evening which is, of course the story of his death, the only story in Mark that Jesus is not the principle character.*

Let us look at the context in which Mark places the story of the death of John the Baptist. Mark's writing is renowned for its intercalation or the sandwich effect in which stories are placed in the midst of stories of other events. The 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark begins with the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth and the infamous line *Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house. (Mark 6: 4)* Then Jesus commissions the twelve and send them out two by two to deal with unclean spirits. The last line of that pericope is the first line of the portion for this evening: *They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them (Mark 6: 13)*. Immediately after our portion, the chapter continues with the return of the 12 from their mission, then the feeding of the 5000, then Jesus walking on water, and the chapter concludes with Jesus healing the sick in Gennesaret.

You could be forgiven for thinking Mark not very good at organization. But in fact Chapter 6 is classic Mark. It positions the work and success of ministry in juxtaposition to the cost of ministry to the minister. Jesus is rejected and John the Baptist is executed. The execution of John is also a foreshadowing of the crucifixion of Jesus that is coming soon. In both cases, what is their crime – speaking truth to power which we know in our time is still dangerous, fraught, and costly and getting worse by the day in many parts of our world.

Our passage comes because Herod Antipas has heard of Jesus and he is terrified because he thinks Jesus is John resurrected. Herod both admired and felt threatened by John. Herod thought John

was a holy man and although he imprisoned him, even as he was in prison, Herod protected him – partly out of fear and partly out of reluctant respect. What was the truth that John spoke to Herod? Nothing short of that Herod was guilty of adultery and incest. Herod divorced his wife in order to marry Herodias his brother Philip's wife who divorced her husband. To make matters worse Herodias was the daughter of another brother of Herod's, so she was also his niece. John had proclaimed the sin of their union which multiple times over broke the Jewish law of that time.

Herod greatly conflicted, trapped himself into acting by his own ego and recklessness. Asking his daughter to dance, he promises her anything she wants up to half his kingdom. But if that is not bad enough, we are told that *he solemnly swore to her*. In law and in practice at that time there was no greater commitment from which one could not be released than the swearing of an oath. Herod now had no choice but to give her that for which she asked. The daughter at the prompting of her mother, who was outraged at John's temerity to judge her, asked for John's head on a platter. There was no way out for Herod; he had sworn a solemn oath. You can imagine Herod's terror when he thinks that Jesus is John resurrected. Not too many months later the same Herod played his role in the condemnation of Jesus. The story of John the Baptist foretells what will happen at that time.

You still might think Mark could have organized all this better. Why does the mission of the disciples come in between Jesus' rejection in Nazareth and Herod's execution of John the Baptist. Don't forget! Eleven of the twelve were executed for saying truth to power. Only John the Apostle lived to die of old age. By the way as a bit of an aside, no where in the Bible is the daughter named. We only know her name was Salome because she was so identified by Josephus, the Jewish, Roman era historian. We also know in the Greek original language she was described as a *korasion* which is a word used only to describe a young girl no more than 12. So the sexual connotations to the dance are all a late 19<sup>th</sup> century invention by the French painter Gustave Moreau who painted a picture of Salome as a scantily clad temptress and by the Anglo-Irish playwright Oscar Wilde who wrote the play Salome and the German composer Richard Strauss who made Wilde's play an opera. The Dance of the Seven Veils was a Wildian invention.

So what does this mean for us. Two things, I think. One it is a lesson in how to read the bible. I am boring on the subject that it is not history, but it is not. But is also not simple story-telling. What appears a rather sparse narrative is deeply layered with multiple levels of meaning. When we approach the Bible with a 21<sup>st</sup> century, can I get Chat GBT to do a summary, mentality we are to use St Paul's phrase, *looking through a glass darkly*. We miss just about everything that matters. The second thing this passage asks us to contemplate is what is our attitude to truth. Are we careful to speak the truth? Are we prepared to listen to the truth even if it is about us? We may not have the power of a Herod Antipas or a Pontius Pilate, but how good are we at hearing the truth about ourselves? Let us pray. God give me the power to speak the truth and the openness and humility to hear the truth. Amen