

St Philip and St James Anglican Church, Palma de Mallorca Spain  
11<sup>th</sup> July 2021 - The Sixth Sunday after Trinity  
Theme: The Authority of Holiness and Truth.

### **Text: Mark 6: 14-29**

#### **Introduction**

In the name of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Today's text is probably one of the best known birthday party stories ever! Mark chose this opportunity, after Jesus sent out his disciples on their first formal mission, to report the death of John the Baptist. Mark hinted at this political death earlier in the story when John was arrested (1:14), but saved the full report until chapter 6. Using intercalation (i.e., the "sandwich" technique) once again, Mark placed this account between the commission and the return of the disciples to intimate its significance for the expansion of Jesus' mission. This gruesome little interlude fills in the time between the sending of the disciples in **Mark 6:7-13** and their return in **6:30**. The mission of the twelve leads into this story of John's martyrdom, but Mark concludes the mission story only after telling us the martyrdom story. He sandwiches the martyrdom story within the mission story for a reason. The disciples' mission is quite successful, and reassures us that God's work continues unabated even in the face of the martyrdom of a great, Godly servant. Mark's church needed to hear this, because they were suffering great persecution. We need to hear it too, because we, like God's people through the ages, are prone to interpret difficult times as a sign that God is either impotent or uncaring.

#### **Exegesis of the Text**

Hearing of Jesus' ministry, Herod immediately thinks of John the Baptist, whom he killed some time earlier (1:14). Herod Antipas is not really king, but tetrarch. That term originally meant "one of four rulers," but came to mean a governor with limited authority. After the death of their father, Herod the Great, the kingdom was divided into four territories; Antipas rules over Galilee and Perea, his brother, Archelaus, rules over Judea and Samaria, and the half-brother, Philip, rules over Gentile territories on the far side of the Jordan River. The story of John's death that follows, then, is a flashback to that time. At the beginning of the section, Mark offered transitional verses in order to express Herod's views of the Jesus' movement. Unlike others who thought that Jesus was a "prophet", Herod thought that Jesus was a resurrected John. Herod's assessment made a close link between the missions of Jesus and John. Not only was Jesus' mission initiated only *after* John's arrest, according to Mark, but Jesus' continual activity was viewed by the "powers that be" as intimately associated with John's. Whether it was customary or not, having his daughter dancing for him and his dinner guests just doesn't sound right. Nor does it seem right that she so "pleased" Herod that he makes the exaggerated oaths to give her whatever she wants. She makes her request for John's head, and Herod is conflicted between protecting John and keeping his word. The executioner's quick action in carrying the task suggests that John is a prisoner in the palace at which the banquet

takes place. John exhibited great courage in criticizing the king for violating Torah law by marrying his brother's wife. That would have been legal if Philip were dead, but Philip is very much alive. We are surprised at Herod's response to John's criticism—he "kept (John) safe". It sounds as if Herod's motive in arresting John may have been twofold; first, to curtail John's criticism and second, to protect John from Herodias' wrath. If John is in Herod's custody, he cannot provoke Herodias further, and he is also beyond Herodias' reach. Even though John is a simple man with no trappings of power, Herod is afraid of him. Even though John confronts Herod, telling him things that Herod prefers not to hear, Herod protects him. Even though Herod surely has advisors who readily offer comfortable counsel, he is drawn to John's rock-solid integrity. As Christians, we need to remember the authority of holiness and truth.

### **Application**

John the Baptist tells the truth, and this account tells the consequences. So, even while we affirm with Jesus that the truth will make you free, we also must recognize that it may get you arrested and killed. That's a paradox, of course, along the lines of "No good deed goes unpunished." Yet this kind of paradox is at the heart of the Gospel. This story serves another purpose as well. The deaths of John and Jesus warn us that God does not always reward faithful discipleship with an easy life. This is contrary to what we get today from televangelists or prosperity gospel preachers from the new religious movements. The prophetic Christian might be beheaded—crucified—thrown to the lions—expelled from college—fired from a job—required to apologize. The truth-teller's road is narrow and filled with potholes. We should not expect applause for preaching prophetically. Worldly wisdom always suggests that you should be cautious, reasonable, and look out for yourself. Keep your options open. Avoid commitments that may later get you stuck. Stay calm. Don't lose your head. John the Baptist, however, was uncompromising in speaking the word given to him. He had to have known that criticizing political authority was no way to get ahead and could only turn out badly. The same deal goes for us. Our affirmation of and allegiance to the truth of the Gospel cannot be a hedge position. It's all or nothing, regardless of the consequences. So what is the good news? It's that the same goes for God in sending Jesus. It's that the same goes for Jesus as he also spoke truth to power. God's good deed for us in Christ does not go without punishment displayed in the crucifixion. Remember our authority as Christians is in us being holy and always standing for the truth regardless of the consequences and opposition from the world. Are you prepared to stand for the truth regardless of the situation you are in? May the almighty God help us to draw some inspiration from those who sacrificed for the truth to the extent of losing their lives. Amen

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