

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 10B

July 14, 2024

Mark 6:14-29

Two Banquets

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.

Good morning! It is good to be with you this beautiful summer day... to worship together and to ponder the meaning of this morning's very difficult gospel lesson about the death of John the Baptist. When we were chatting the other day, I asked your rector Karen about the topic of today's gospel lesson. She said that she would not, at all, miss preaching about the beheading of John the Baptist. Nevertheless, we are here to do the work of finding the good news... as it comes to us from today's lesson from Mark's gospel. I would like to begin with words by the commentator David Ewart who has said:

“Just in case we are getting too excited and thinking this business of being a disciple of Jesus is going to be a piece of cake, is going to be a story of ever-increasing fame, miracles, and wonders, Mark gives a story of a good man being executed because of weakness, capriciousness, and vengeance.”¹

As we do every Sunday, our work us to mine the gospel story for God's message of life, hope, transformation and resurrection. Some weeks... the work of gleaning the good news is harder than on other weeks... so let us roll up our sleeves and get to work.

As I was pondering this passage, I couldn't help but envision a modern-day person... who was picking up a Bible for the first time... as the pages fall open to the sixth chapter of Mark's gospel to reveal a story of paranoid guilt, vengeance, a dancing girl, and blood. What possible good news would this first-time Bible reader find? What if this was the person's one and only encounter with the Bible? Today's narrative lifts-up the importance of considering the whole of the gospel message, not just a few passages, not simply one story. It is important to aim for the heart of the gospel message... to uncover the good news that Jesus incarnated... and came to share with us.

It is always good to step back and consider biblical lessons in their narrative and historical contexts. In the various ancient texts that have been handed down to us... we are not simply to pick and choose stories and verses that suit our tastes... we are not simply to focus only on what works for us... and avoid passages that we find troublesome. It is for us to do the work of encountering even the most difficult texts. So... what do we do with this gut-wrenching story in which a hero... who does everything right... is... nonetheless... killed?

In his commentary about the story of the beheading of John the Baptist, David Lose writes:

“I'll be honest, when this story comes along once every three years, my first response is to scratch my head in bewilderment. I mean, what is going on? Or, more particularly, what is going on with Mark? [The gospel writer Mark is usually] the soul of brevity whose favorite word, if not middle name is, 'immediately.' [There is a sense of 'urgency' throughout Mark's account of the Good

¹ Holy Textures, Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours, Mark 6:14-29, David Ewart, 2009.

News.]. Mark luxuriates over this gruesome scene for sixteen whole verses – a veritable novella in relation to the rest of his Gospel! Not only that, but it is the only story Mark tells in which Jesus makes no appearance. [Furthermore], it is told in flashback, the only time Mark employs this particular literary device. So, I’ll ask again, what is going on?”²

From a purely literary standpoint, it is curious to find today’s story to be one of the longest in all of Mark. This is particularly puzzling because Mark’s gospel is the shortest and leanest of the four gospel books. Mark doesn’t tend to elaborate. When describing Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness... Mark uses a mere two verses. Today’s story is a full sixteen verses. It is interesting to note that Matthew offers a shorter version of John’s death, and that Luke doesn’t include the story at all. ...and, nowhere in this text do we hear from Jesus. A majority of commentators believe that the purpose of today’s story is twofold: to foreshadow Jesus’ own grisly death, and to offer an interlude between last week’s story... about the sending of the disciples... with the stories that are to follow... beginning with the feeding of the 5,000.

In this interlude story, we encounter Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who ruled at the time of Jesus’ birth and who was responsible for the “Slaughter of the Innocents.”... the murder of male children under the age of two. Herod Junior... had been hearing news about Jesus, the itinerant preacher, and his band of disciples. The fact that Herod had had John put to death... made him wonder if John had risen from the dead and was among the rabble rousers who were following along with Jesus. The increasing chatter about Jesus sent shivers down Herod’s spine. We hear that Herod’s guilt was getting the better of him just before we are given a flashback to the actual story of John’s beheading.

Herod had John arrested because Herod feared the baptizer. He had John arrested, bound and thrown into prison. The crime? John spoke the truth. John had called out Herod as an adulterer for marrying his brother’s wife, an accusation that especially angered Herod’s murderous wife Herodias. Initially, Herod refrained from killing John because he knew that John was “a righteous and holy man.” Herod would visit John in prison. Herod enjoyed listening to John, and was intrigued by him... even though things that the wise man said seemed somewhat perplexing to Herod. We know the story about the banquet and of a daughter’s dance that inspired Herod to offer anything the girl wanted... even half of the kingdom. When the girl consulted her mother about Herod’s generous offer, Herodias knew that the moment had come to wreak her revenge on John. Herod was deeply grieved about the request to have John the Baptist’s head delivered to the banquet on a platter. Even so, Herod made a coward’s choice. Herod didn’t want to lose face in front of his guests. He didn’t want to go back on his word... and he didn’t want to refuse the request of a beloved daughter and her angry mother.

Today’s grizzly story... as difficult as it is... is dramatic and compelling. If anything, the story offers a blaring contrast between the story of Herod and his family, and the vision that Jesus came to show us. If the choice is living in a realm of political intrigue, paranoia, abuse of power, and murder... or to live in a kingdom in which there are no winners and losers, a realm in which all know that they are blessed, fed and cared for... a reality in which peace is firmly rooted... we... as followers of Christ, would most certainly choose the banquet of abundant life.

The kingdom that Jesus proclaims might be viewed by some as odd and idealistic... especially in the challenging times in which we live. The hard truth is that pain and suffering exist... and... that in a

² <https://www.davidlose.net/tag/mark-614-29/>

world in which prophetic truth-telling challenges earthly power... earthly powers may seek to exact a blood price, even in our time. But the vision that Jesus proclaims... is one that echoes through creation and down through the centuries. Our faith... is in the one who calls us to life... Our faith is in the one who calls us to the sacred ground of truth telling... Our faith is rooted the one who invites us to walk in the light of compassion and peace. The execution of John the Baptist illustrates what happens when human attention... and human passions... exclude God.

The gospel writer Mark uses some interesting word choices as he illustrates the two contrasting realms... the lifeless kingdom of Herod and his deeds... and the reign of God. In today's story, we hear of Herd's ostentatious banquet. Soon, we will hear of the feeding of the 5,000 in a heavenly banquet that was hosted right here on earth. Mark uses the same word for Herod "grieving" his murderous deeds... as he does when describing Jesus being "deeply grieved" in the Garden of Gethsemane.. just before his arrest and execution. Herod orders John to be "beheaded." In the letter to the Ephesians, we will encounter a version of the Greek word that describes Jesus as the one who "re-capitulates"... the one who brings all things together... the one who heads all things up. All Herod can do is "decapitate."

The story of our faith is big.... it encompasses the whole of the human story... the good, the tragic, and the horrific. The story of John's beheading is shocking. Its truth jolts us out of any sense of complacency and comfort. Herod's execution of John the Baptist reflects what happens when our passions and our attention... stay earthbound in the worst possible way. We mourn the death of John, the great prophet and truth teller. We are given a lesson of contrasts... illustrated in Herod's weakness, as compared with the strength of John's witness. Herod's abusive power was that of earthly empire... the fruits of that abused power being suffering and death.

I would like to end by quoting David Lose once again:

"Which brings us to the very heart of the gospel promise. We believe, teach, and confess that Jesus came to make possible for us more than mere survival, more than mere persistence, more than even mere success. Jesus came to help us imagine that there is more to this life than we can perceive. Jesus came to offer us not just more life, but abundant life. Jesus came so that there could be a better ending to our stories... and the story of the world... than we can imagine or construct on our own."

The story in ongoing and forever...

And we are invited...

to lift our hearts and our minds into the awareness and grace

of God's ever-loving, ever-living presence...

and to be faithful in gathering at the table of LIFE

to feast together

and to remember who we are,

and to whom we belong...

Amen...