

July 12, 09

Mark 6: 14 – 29 Herod's Gethsemane. (filed, "temptation")

Scripture Introduction

- Today's scripture from the gospel of Mark contains a dark little story, of how King Herod is manoeuvred into beheading John the Baptist. Mark uses a framing technique- where he puts one story within another- and the stories interpret one another.
- Today's story is sandwiched between two miraculous events; in both Jesus trains his disciples to follow in his way. And so we might see today's story as a foil to Jesus way: today's story shows us how the way of the world leads to death as opposed to Jesus way, that leads to life.
- Immediately before today's reading, Jesus has sent out his followers to do some field work as part of their training, he gives them authority over the spirits, and they go out preaching repentance, casting out demons and curing the sick. Just basic stuff.
- But I'd like us to note this: they're to go empty handed, carrying nothing, just with their human need, dependent on the good will of others.
- Immediately after today's reading, as though there is no Herod story in between, they return full of stories of their achievements. Jesus knows that they're empty and takes them off to a quiet place to be replenished,
- But crowds follow them, 5,000 people. They're hungry, but the disciples have nothing to feed them with, just 5 loaves and 2 fish, and Jesus shows them how through the grace of God, what they have is sufficient.
- So we have these two stories of the grace of God working through human emptiness and need, and in between, Mark has inserted today's reading.
- A Warning: this scripture may contain scenes of sexuality and violence. Listener discretion is advised.

READ SCRIPTURE: Mark 6: 13 – 29. (I'm going to begin with the last line of the former passage)

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

SERMON: "Herod's Gethsemane"

A man shared with his psychiatrist things that he kept doing that he felt really badly about it, but he couldn't stop doing. His psychiatrist said, "What would you like me to do for you? I could give you something that would weaken the desire..."

"Oh," said the man, "I was rather hoping you could give me something that would weaken my conscience."

Today's dark little scripture is about temptation; those things in the world that draw us from the things of God, and our struggle to choose rightly.

In Deuteronomy, God says, I put before you Life and Death; choose Life that you may live. This is our struggle constantly- to choose life, to choose what is life giving and not to settle for something that has no power to give life.

When the girl Herodias asks Herod for the head of John the Baptist, we're told that Herod was deeply grieved. The same word is used for Herod's emotions as is used for Jesus' pain as he struggles in the Garden of Gethsemane. What we have in today's scripture is Herod's Gethsemane.

In Gethsemane, Jesus begs God, "all things are possible with you, please Father, let this cup pass from me. But, your will be done, not mine." Jesus chooses God's will, though it goes against every fibre of his human desire to be spared suffering.

And Herod struggles between his inner sense of right and the pressures of the world. – he does not want to kill John, John is a righteous man, and Herod LIKES him- but he also does not want to lose face- and Herod chooses to save his pride, rather than save John's life.

In his struggle we can see our own Gethsemanes- our own struggles with doing the right thing, the life giving thing, the will of God, rather than buckling under pressure from others, allowing our pride to rule, taking a path that does not bring life.

But let's go back to the beginning to see how Herod got himself into this pickle. For that has to be our story too in some way.

It was Herod's birthday. And Herod was throwing a party, to which all the important people had been invited.

Exotic food was served, nothing but the best, drink flowed liberally– Probably it's an all men's event. It's Herod's opportunity to show his friends, rivals, enemies what a great man he is- to show off his wealth, and his power.

Towards the end of the meal, Herod's stepdaughter/ niece Herodias (she apparently has the same name as her mother) the girl, Herodias, entertains them with a dance. Herod is delighted especially as he notes the response of his guests.

Never one to miss the opportunity of playing to the crowds, he exclaims, "Ask me for anything, and you can have it! Half my kingdom? It's yours!" You can just hear the men's responses- "All right, Herod, way to go", interspersed with crude comments, laughter. Speculation as to what she'll ask for.

A white stallion, silk dresses, the hand of the handsome young general in marriage. Half the kingdom was, of course, purely rhetorical - the kingdom wasn't Herod's to give. Herod was just a puppet of Rome. But it sounded good.

"Whatever you want is yours!" What could Herod have been thinking!? Rather like the woman who apparently went shopping at Wall Mart with a forged \$1m bill. She bought \$1800 worth of goods and apparently expected them to give her change!

What could she have been thinking! Sin is kind of like that- we slip away from the truth- we fantasise and then believe our fantasy. We act on lies and wonder why they blow up in our faces.

What could Herod have been thinking, imagining that he was so great a man that he could give to the girl whatever she asked!

Now Herodias was just a child- she didn't know what to ask for. So she ran off to ask her mother. Her mother Herodias, you'll notice is described as the wife of Herod's brother Philip. Herod is in an adulterous relationship with her.

It seems that John the Baptist has spoken out repeatedly against this relationship. And at Herodias' insistence Herod has had John arrested, to silence his public accusations. She would much rather have done it thoroughly, just killed John, but Herod protects him.

And Herodias stews in her anger, the hatred brewing within her, seething and seeking a way of expression, until the moment arrives. When we allow our hatred to burn in us, there will come an opportune moment when that hatred will have the chance to do great harm.

Herodias' daughter comes and says, "Mommy, Uncle Herod says I can have anything. What shall I ask for?"

And the words are instantly out of her mother's lips, "The head of John the Baptist". What a shocking thing to ask of a child. But life is like that.

Everywhere in the world, adults with evil intentions exploit children and draw them into the evil they do. Today we'll be commissioning Joy Sumyi Lee to go this summer to Cambodia with Ratanak foundation to work with children rescued from the sex trade.

Children sold and trafficked for sex as part of a multi billion dollar business. People with evil intent don't hesitate to use children- from financial exploitation in factories to sex slavery to forcing children into armies where they have to perform acts of terrible cruelty and violence.

Everywhere there are children whose lives have been destroyed by the evil intentions of adults. Young Herodias is in some ways both child seductress and child soldier rolled into one.

She runs back in to Herod, " I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist," - perhaps she's worried about how she will carry it, and so in her child like creativity she adds, "on a platter."

One can imagine the gasp around the room. The silence that falls, as the men wait to see what Herod will do. He HAS promised anything. Is he gutsy enough to see this through.....?

Herod is in turmoil. Angst. Not John. Not John. He liked to listen to him, we're told. We might imagine Herodias pacing her chambers at night wondering where her husband was. Not down in the dungeon again, talking with the Baptist?

A single guard nearby with a smoking torch. While Herod asked his questions, "what do you mean the axe is laid to the root of the tree? What tree? What do you mean the coming one will baptise with fire and spirit? You say he's going to be king? But you call him the lamb of God, how can he be king and lamb at the same time?.....?"

And John likely told Herod over and over what he needed to do to prepare for the coming- to repent, to turn around, to change his ways.

Herod loved to listen. Something in him was stirred. But he just couldn't get around to taking the action- he couldn't give up Herodias. We always think that we have time to make changes for good. We're just not quite ready yet. And then suddenly it's too late. Herod thought he had everything under control-

He's keeping John alive, he gets to chat with him, he has Herodias in his bedroom. He can handle things. But suddenly it's too late. The brewing hatred, his own indecision have blown up in his face.

And the men are waiting. If he steps down from his promise he'll be the laughing stock in circles of power all the way back to Rome. He cannot turn back. The die is cast. And he gives the order.

How often do we not do the thing we should because it will cause us embarrassment? How often are we silent when we should speak? How often do we attack others or withdraw, all because we don't wish to reveal our needs, our weakness. We want to save our pride, avoid embarrassment.

I think of the woman in the movie, "The Reader". As a guard in a Nazi concentration camp, she is now on trial along with other guards. She is no MORE responsible than the other guards, but she takes the

fall for them- she accepts a 20 year prison sentence because she is too ashamed to admit that she is illiterate.

The only evidence against her is a signature that the others claim to be hers, and she would rather go to prison than admit that she cannot write.

How often does pride get in the way of our taking a life giving path? Everyone has needs, but we pretend that we don't. It feels so shameful and weak to admit that we need something. That we need understanding, acceptance, equality, whatever.

A friend of mine has always believed that her mother does not love her, that her mother favours her sister. Recently her mother organised a family gathering to which she did not invite my friend.

The hurt she felt was so deep and went back so many years. Her response was to withdraw from her mother, not speak to her. But she never told her mother why she was angry or what had hurt her- because it's really hard to be naked, so to speak, with our needs.

My friend, however, was concerned that her mother is elderly and could die any time and she wanted more than anything to be at peace with her mother and with herself when that time came.

And so the matter was urgent. This was the moment for her to choose a different way. And so she plucked up her courage and called her mother, told her that she needed her mother to understand why she had been angry and she asked if her mother wanted to understand. And her mother, of course, said "yes, she did."

It turned out that her mother hadn't had a clue as to how she was hurting her daughter. My friend had never let on before what her need was.

It turned out too that she didn't in fact need her mother to change anything- her mother had listened and understood, and that was actually all she wanted from her mother, to be heard and understood, and she was at peace.

To get there, though, she'd had to risk being seen in her weakness, in her need. This is the way that Jesus teaches- the way of vulnerability.

Jesus comes without worldly power or riches, always dependent on others for bodily sustenance, willing to accept shame and public suffering so that God could bring out of his apparent weakness, new life for all.

I want to close with words from Paul, from the same passage that Cathy preached so well on last week, where Paul talked about a thorn in the flesh that God would not remove.

How we would we love God to remove those things that shame us, that reveal us as weak. But Paul says he heard this from God:

"My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness." "So", Paul says, 'I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. I'm content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

To God be all the praise the honour and the glory, Amen.

