

Thank you, Father, for making yourself known to us through your word. We ask you to encourage us in our faith, so that we may be ready to serve you; for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our gospel reading for today is quite an unusual story, for many reasons. The first unusual aspect of this story of John the Baptist's death, is how long it is. Mark throughout his gospel, is usually the master of brevity. His favourite word to this point in his gospel, is "immediately," Yet Mark takes 16 verses to tell this rather gruesome story. Not only that, but it is the only story Mark tells in which Jesus makes no appearance. And it's the only time Mark writes of an event in flashback.

It is also an unusual story because it doesn't seem to have a point, other than to relate an event during the ministry of Jesus. Some scholars have suggested however that this story is actually a type of parable. The Kingdom of God as set forth by Jesus has been the focus of Mark's story thus far. It is about Jesus freeing people from the forces that rob them of abundant life. Scholars have suggested that Mark wants to compare what life is like with Jesus and the Kingdom of God and what life is like in the worldly structures of power, paranoia and corruption.

We were told quite briefly that John was arrested in the first chapter of Mark's gospel, but now Mark fills in the story. King Herod had cast aside his own wife to marry his brother's wife, Herodias. When John condemned the dishonourable marriage, the king's new wife sought revenge, and the king, ignoring his conscience, imprisoned John. Soon afterwards, the king throws himself a birthday party for the glitterati of first century Judea.

But events were to take an even nastier turn, when Herod's step-daughter daughter 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." Traditionally, the girl's name has been given as Salome, but in the NRSV translation that we use, rather than say she was the daughter of Herodias, Herod's wife, she is called Herodias as well.

Also, traditionally, her dance was thought to have been seductive and she has been cast over the centuries as the classic 'femme fatale' with her use of her seven veils, none of which is actually mentioned in Mark's account. We find rather that the word for "girl" was the same word used of the 12-year old girl raised by Jesus in our gospel reading two weeks ago, so we might assume that she was only about 12 years of age herself. And the Greek word for dance used in the story is the same word used in the Greek translation of the dancing of King David, when he danced before the Ark of the Covenant in our first reading today. This suggests the young lady's dance was joyful, not seductive. And finally, the word for "pleased", as in her dance 'pleased Herod and

his guests' is also used in 1 Corinthians to refer to "pleasing the Lord", which would also seem to rule out any sexual aspect of the young girl's dance.

But whatever her dance was, it certainly placed the impulsive Herod in a tight spot when the girl, inspired by her vengeful mother, asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod had made an oath. His guests had heard it. He must keep his word or lose face in front of the important people of the Kingdom. In a world where feeling compassion or empathy for others is construed as weakness, Herod beheads John to save face rather than admit he made a foolish promise. Herod greatly admired John, but not enough to risk his own honour and prestige to protect him.

Herod's actions are not all that different from the callous manipulations of power we see today, where cruelty is praised for the sake of appearing strong and people are vulnerable people are punished in the name of law and order and security.

What bothers me about John the Baptist's death is that there seems to be no reason for it, really. John is one of those people who does everything right, and then suffers anyway because of a naïve girl, a vindictive queen, and a spineless king. Even Jesus seemed to struggle with John's death. According to Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus heard of John's death, "he left in a boat to a remote area to be alone." He didn't just put a happy face on and 'got on with it.' Even Jesus mourned the loss of someone near and dear to him. And it was only after he mourned that he returned. And what did he do when he returned? Well, the Feeding of the Five Thousand directly follows John's death. Jesus came back from mourning, asked a crowd to sit down, gathered whatever bread and fish he could find, and fed the people with what God had given.

It's tempting to read a story like John the Baptist's and tell ourselves that it comes from a rougher, cruder, and more barbaric time. But of course we see and hear on a daily that this is just not true. We still live in world where the innocent are detained, imprisoned, tormented, and killed. We still live in a world of sudden and random violence. We still live in a world where young women are used by people in power. And we still live in a world where speaking truth to that power is fraught with danger.

But maybe "the point" of this Gospel story is to remind us that the Christian faith is difficult, that it doesn't promise us endless comfort, prosperity, and blessing in exchange for a good life. Maybe the point is to follow Jesus' example, to allow ourselves the space and time to grieve and mourn the terrible things of life, and then, and only then, to feed the people around us with what God has given us, knowing that it will be more than enough and that it will be life-giving.