

For, Herod seemed to know that John taught the truth, yet he would never bring himself to admit it. For, to admit it would mean having to change his lifestyle. And Herod was too enamoured of Herodias to want to give her up. Similarly, how many people today, deep down, know their lifestyle to be wrong before God, but are too wedded to their desires to be willing to give them up? And Christians are far from immune from this! We, too, can be like Herod – *hearing*, but never *obeying*.

Herod's choices through his life drove him further and further from God. After he ordered John the Baptist's death, he appears to have been somewhat conscience stricken for killing a righteous man, but there is absolutely no remorse shown later, when he sent the even more righteous Jesus to his death (recorded in Luke 23). Sadly, that is often the way things work. If we do enough wrong for long enough, we can learn to silence even our own conscience, and thereby so harden our hearts to Jesus that his word cannot break through into our lives. This is why regular repentance is so important in the Christian life, and why we should embrace the chance to be truly accountable to other respected Christians. We all need someone who will tell us the truth, genuinely in love, if we are to follow God's will for our lives, which is that we become like Christ.

And there is a further really interesting dynamic at work in Herod. He held all the human power, while John was his helpless subject. Yet, in reality, John's moral purity held the power, and Herod was scared of *him*. That dynamic existed even more when *Jesus* powerfully stood in silence before Herod, refusing to answer his questions or perform the miracle show that Herod longed to see. Once more, Herod encountered a power that he could not intimidate into doing his will – a power that intimidated him so much he could only deal with it by ridiculing Jesus and sending him back to Pilate to be executed. Herod must have thought that day that he had won, finally silencing the troublesome preacher who refused to do his bidding. But Jesus' resurrection definitively turned the tables. Right may not always have its way in *this* world – it may even provoke strong negative reactions from those with the power to harm. But right will always have the ultimate victory, for God upholds the cause of right, and no-one is more powerful than him.

So, in closing, let me ask a few questions.

- 1) Learning from Herod's mistakes, are there situations in which you might be tempted to compromise what is right in order to save face?
- 2) Following on from that, again learning from Herod's mistakes, is there anyone to whom you are genuinely accountable in your Christian life – someone who loves you, and whom you trust and allow to call out sin in your life? If we are serious about growing in Christlikeness, we all need such people in our lives, and we all need to submit to them.
- 3) Lastly, learning from John's example, what price are you willing to pay to stand up for Jesus' Gospel? To quote from Chris Bowater's Song, *Here I Am, Wholly Available*, "God's looking for a people who are willing to be counted in his glorious victory." Are you willing, no matter what it costs?

[Pray]

God's Law for his people. Jesus' authoritative teaching might easily lead to such a conclusion. Others thought he was specifically the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. And there is some sense in this too, since God, through Elijah, did similar miracles to those performed by Jesus, including raising the dead back to life. And the Old Testament ends with the prophesied *return* of Elijah, before the coming of God's Messiah King (Malachi 4:5-6). Later in this Gospel, Jesus will indicate that the ministry of John the Baptist fulfilled this prophecy as one in the same *mould* as Elijah.

But the crowd's first recorded suggestion – that Jesus is John the Baptist raised back to life – may be the most surprising, even given a number of similarities between John's teaching and Jesus' teaching. For, John and Jesus were contemporaries. John had even baptised Jesus! They were clearly different people! Did they really think that John had literally been raised from the dead as Jesus? Or, perhaps more likely, did they mean that John's *spirit*, or his *prophetic calling*, had been resurrected in Jesus, like Elijah's spirit was passed on to Elisha on his transportation to heaven? Or was it not nearly as clearly reasoned out as all that? Was it more a reflection that, when people reject the *truth* about Jesus, they don't believe nothing; rather they tend to believe *anything* about him, however illogical?

Whatever the ins and outs of it, this belief clearly abounded, and Herod certainly latched on to it. (By the way, this is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who had tried to kill Jesus at his birth). In Herod's case, his belief was very much born out of fear! For, he had ordered John's execution, and he knew it was wrong. Just as Scrooge was tortured by the memory of Jacob Marley in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, so Herod was tortured by the memory of John. And, since John prepared the way for Jesus and taught the way of God in line with Jesus' teaching, a rejection of John was essentially a rejection of Jesus too. It's possible that Mark was making this exact point by sandwiching this account between Jesus' sending out his twelve disciples and them returning to report back about their mission. The disciples were told to shake the dust off their feet as a sign of the judgement to come upon anyone who rejected their message. Does Herod stand as an example of just such a person?

You see, this passage brings into sharp relief not only the question, "Who is Jesus?", but also the follow up question, "What difference does Jesus' identity make to your life?" – albeit, it does that by proxy, since the focus shifts to Herod's rejection of *John's* message, rather than his response to *Jesus* directly. (Perhaps Mark also wishes to honour John's martyrdom, as an example of the cost that some will willingly pay to follow Jesus).

Herod's response to John's teaching was full of contradictions. Somehow John had gained access to speak to Herod and had boldly used the opportunity to condemn his immoral behaviour in taking his brother's wife as his own. Herod's response, because he was infatuated with Herodias, was to put John in prison. Yet he protected John from Herodias' desire to kill him, because deep down he knew John to be a righteous man, and he feared him – presumably, therefore, he feared God's reaction if he killed such a righteous man! Furthermore, Herod regularly called for John, so as to listen to him – indeed he *liked* to listen to him, even though he was greatly puzzled by his teaching. And he was deeply troubled when Herodias trapped him into killing John (no doubt taking advantage of his drunken rashness), but he was not troubled *enough* to do the right thing and retract his oath. In the end, Herod feared losing face with his courtiers *more* than he feared God. So, he allowed himself to become subject to the wicked schemes of his wife, like Ahab with Jezebel, rather than stand up for what he knew to be right.

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 9th May 2021. Andy Banks:
Mark 6:14-29 - Interlude: Herod, Jesus and John the Baptist

The children's material is again following a different theme to my sermon this week, so feel free to tune in to that at home, or quietly talk through it with your children here, instead of listening to me. We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, reading today from Mark 6:14-29.

[Read Mark 6:14-29]

14King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, 'John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.'

15Others said, 'He is Elijah.'

And still others claimed, 'He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.'

16But when Herod heard this, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!'

17For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. 18For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' 19So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, 20because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

21Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. 22When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, 'Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you.' 23And he promised her with an oath, 'Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.'

24She went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask for?'

'The head of John the Baptist,' she answered.

25At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: 'I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a dish.'

26The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, 28and brought back his head on a dish. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. 29On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

[Pray]

Who is Jesus? Lots of people today, from all religions and from none, still admire him as a great moral teacher, even if they couldn't quote much of his teaching – except perhaps "Love your neighbour as yourself." There is something about the purity and goodness of his life and words that remains irrefutable. Of course, it is one thing to admire Jesus' teaching; it is quite another to accept his claim to be God in human flesh and to seek to *live* by his teaching! Far fewer will do that.

But this is nothing new. Our passage today opens with a range of opinions about Jesus' identity. Taking them in reverse order, some in the population speculated that he was a nameless Old Testament prophet returned, or perhaps *The Prophet*, spoken of by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15-19, who would definitively interpret