

Speaking Truth to Power

John the Baptist January 17th 2021

Revd Huw Davies

When people in power don't want to be confronted with the awkward truth or challenged about the rights or wrongs of their choices and behaviours they often resort to violence or censure of those who are challenging them.

This is just as true for us as it is for the Presidents and Kings of this world. You see it at work in American politics at the moment and you see it at work in our own lives.

Threats and intimidation are the tools to silence those who raise difficult questions and it takes courage to stand up for what is right.

It can happen in the big and public areas of life such as when John confronted King Herod sometimes called Herod Antipas

The son of King Herod the Great who had been afraid of Jesus' birth and ordered the baby boys in Bethlehem to be killed in an effort to stamp out any threat to his rule.

After Herod the Great had died there were all sorts of political assassinations and jockeying.

Herod the Great uncovered a plot to poison him and he had two of his sons executed for that. His daughter Herodias he married off to her uncle known as Herod Phillip but he was banished to Rome for his part in the plot.

After Herod the Great's death his other son, Herod Antipas, became the ruler of Judea as a puppet of the Roman Emperor Tiberius who appointed Pontius Pilate to be the real Governor of Judea with all the might of the occupying Roman soldiers.

Herodias divorced her uncle Herod Phillip and left him in Rome and came back home to marry his brother Herod Antipas and it was this that John the Baptist spoke out against.

The gospels tell us that Herod Antipas had John the Baptist arrested in an attempt to silence him but John would not be intimidated.

Herodias pressured her husband to dispose of John and stop his embarrassing preaching but Herod would not until one day Herodias had her daughter, Salome, dance before them at a party and when Herod delighted by her dancing offered her any reward she would choose inspired by her mother Salome publicly asked for the head of John the Baptist.

You and I, living here in Sandy are very unlikely to come across such extreme pressure to back off from the public declaration of corruption and the challenging of people in power.

But people in politics in America today are having to consider whether pressure and intimidation of their families by mob violence and powerful men will silence their voices for standing up for what is right.

It has always been so.

It is still so today.

In Hong Kong or Tibet, North Korea or dozens of countries across the world speaking out for what you see as injustice can get you arrested and even killed as it did with John the Baptist.

The BIBLE is full of stories of real human life tackling every human condition. From family relationships to political intrigue,

from how to handle money to how to put God first in your life.

From how to guide and bring up your children to how to take care of your aging parents.

As Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16 It is God's word to us and is relevant to every situation.

2 Timothy chapter 3

¹⁰ You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹ persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

It gives us example after example of how to live.

Not by giving rules and dictates that are bound by time and culture and will go out of date.

But through stories and examples we can discover for ourselves how to put the principles into practice.

Romans chapter 15 v 4

⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

That is why Stanley Baldwin, three times Prime Minister between 1923 and 1937 described the Bible as “High Explosive”

That is why dictators and despots throughout history have banned it and tried to hide it from their people or have tried to harness it and the power of the Christian church for their own ends.

Who can forget Donald Trump cynically suppressing a peaceful protest with riot police and teargas in order to stand in front of a church and have his photo taken with a Bible in his hand whilst turning a blind eye to a murderous mob storming the legitimate seat of Government.

We have just recently read in the Christmas story how John the Baptist was the cousin of Jesus.

Jesus’ mother Mary and John’s mother Elizabeth were cousins.

The circumstances of John’s birth get more space in the gospel than Jesus’.

In Matthew’s Gospel the angel appearing to Mary and Joseph to tell them about the birth of Jesus takes four verses.

In Luke’s Gospel the circumstances surrounding the birth of John the Baptist takes 75 verses to recount.

So what is so important about this man John the Baptist and his ministry.

Why not read the accounts for yourself and see what you can discover.

Luke chapter 1 His birth.

Luke chapter 3 His ministry

Luke chapter 7 Jesus’ words about John

Mark chapter 6 John’s death

In what way is John's life and preaching relevant to us today?

John calls us to repent.

And Malachi says he will turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents and the hearts of the people to the Lord.

John – Jesus' cousin is sometimes known as John the Baptist but sometimes and perhaps better called John the Baptizer. He called people to repent, to turn back to God. To leave behind mere religion and words and put into practice what God calls us to in everyday life.

As a sign and symbol of that he called people to have a ceremonial washing – a baptism in water as a sign of this washing clean and going under the water as a sign of dying and coming up out again as a sign of rebirth.

Paul writes of it this way in Romans 6 v 4

Jesus used this symbol and Christians have since the beginning Acts chapter 2

Church of England and Methodists will baptise families, adults and children.

The Baptist church are not followers of John the Baptist but in 1600 s it came out of a movement to reform the church from mere religion to baptizing believing adults.

And the C of E in its latest book of prayers and ceremonies allows for this too. When people have been baptised as infants but now found an adult faith for themselves they may want to re-affirm the statements made by their parents on their behalf when they were baptised as infants and use this symbol of water, often in what is known as full-immersion.

It is a powerful symbol of a fresh start.

But only effective in as much as our faith is lived out.

I have a friend, let's call him John

At the age of 30 he found his own faith.

Was baptised as an adult

It has had a wonderful effect upon his family, his children, his priorities.

He was in sales and challenged by his tax returns - very topical this time of year!!

But when he declared his Christmas bonus he had to face the anger of his colleagues who then had to declare theirs.

At the New Year trust in God and strength to face the future whatever may come

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