

Holy Trinity Sunningdale
Sunday July 11, 2021
Reading – Mark 6:14-29; John the Baptist Beheaded

There are some horror stories in the Bible, and one of the best is the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. Shakespeare's Macbeth is no match for the story of the murder of John. Our Gospel reading has quite a few colourful characters we could consider but today I have chosen to look at John the Baptist.

John the Baptist spoke up and condemned Herod for divorcing his wife and marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. Herodias hated John the Baptist. Herod actually believed John was a Godly man but had him arrested and put in prison.

An interesting aspect of Linda's job as the Year 1 teacher is helping children adjust to their first full day of school. Little Ryan was used to going home at noon in kindergarten; so when it was time to go to lunch, he got his things ready to leave for home. Linda asked him what he was doing. "I'm going home," he replied. Linda explained that now he is in Year 1, he would have a longer school day. "You'll go eat lunch now," she said, "and then you'll come back to the room and do some more work before you go home." Ryan looked up at her in disbelief. When he saw she was serious, Ryan put his hands on his hips and demanded, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?"

Sometimes we feel like Ryan when we are serving Christ. It's a lot harder than we thought and we wonder, "Who signed me up for this program." With events in the world right now, there's a lot that doesn't make sense. We begin to wonder "Where is God in the middle of all the chaos and the tension in the world."

John's calling or purpose was to prepare the way for Jesus. When anyone said, "we want to follow you," he said, "No, follow Jesus." He even baptized Jesus. John stood up for truth and he was in prison for proclaiming the truth. If I'm John the Baptist and I'm standing up for Jesus, I'm going to think Jesus is going to do something for me. Yet he ends up waiting and waiting. Jesus kept doing his ministry of healing the sick, hanging out with the outcasts, while John waited.

Where's God when life doesn't make sense? What do you do when you're praying and God seems distant? John the Baptist was human. He did what we would have done. He started asking questions. In Matthew 11, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Maybe he was wondering, "Is Jesus really who I thought he is?" Why isn't Jesus helping me? Jesus told John's disciples "Go and tell John that the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." Jesus continues doing what God sent Him to do while John continues to wait.

Jesus' response mirrors how some people make it even more difficult for us. There's that person you know who's always praising God. You say your house burned down and "PRAISE the LORD!" You've got something really bad going on in your life and they got a parking spot at the mall, "GLORY!" You're like, "Agh, you make me sick!"

Then Herod, throws a huge party. He had too much to drink and the daughter of Herodias, Salome, does a dance. Herod loved the dance so much that he made a promise he would later regret. Salome, under the influence of her mother, asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod ordered the execution of John the Baptist because of a foolish promise.

John the Baptist served Jesus faithfully. Jesus had the power to rescue him but that didn't happen! Somehow that just doesn't feel right. Our thinking is that someone like John, someone like ourselves, should get Jesus coming to our aid. Now, that's emotion speaking. If we take a step back and remove the emotion, here's what we know, John's mission was accomplished. John came to prepare the way for Jesus and he did that. God's purpose was fulfilled, the blind would see, the deaf would hear, the gospel was being proclaimed. What God planned came to pass. It just wasn't the way John planned. We don't have to understand the plan to trust God's purpose. We don't even have to like the plan to trust God's purpose.

If you're like me, you go, "Okay, God, what's the plan? I want to know the plan. Just tell me the plan and I'll be fine. I may not like it, but at least I'm not clueless. I ask what's the plan and God says just trust me.

Jesus experienced something similar. In the garden of Gethsemane, he fell on His face and prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." Then Jesus said . . . "nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." Not my plan, but your purpose. Just because God is silent, doesn't mean God is absent. The key message is that there is more to life than our earthly circumstances.

The story of John the Baptist's death is meant to shock us out of our complacency. We are called to confront the evil we see around us. Confrontation is never comfortable, but it is necessary. Those who proclaim the truth of God's word will certainly face opposition, and John was no exception. John was faithful to his calling and faithful to death. He prepared the way for Jesus and pointed people to Jesus and so should we. As individuals and as the church we must spend our lives preparing the way for Jesus, pointing toward Jesus and drawing people to Jesus.

To close, I ask that you turn the words of this old hymn into your personal prayer:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. Amen.

Dolapo Ogunbawo