

GOSPEL READING FOR JULY 12, 2015

START WITH SCRIPTURE: Mark 6:14-29

OBSERVE:

In this passage, the prophet and the king collide. Religion and politics intersect. Moral authority and worldly power are in conflict.

The passage begins by informing us about John the Baptist's fate. Of course we have met this dynamic and charismatic prophet at the very beginning of Mark's Gospel, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; and at Jesus' request, he has inaugurated Jesus' ministry by baptizing Jesus himself.

But as we say in the South, "he quite preachin' and went to meddlin'" when he began to address a moral wrong in the palace of King Herod himself.

The passage begins by describing Herod's intense interest in the ministry of Jesus — who is coming to his attention after Herod has executed John. Speculation and rumors are wild — some believe that Jesus is Elijah, others that he is a prophet, like the Hebrew prophets of old. But Herod is convinced that the only person capable of performing the miracles that are attributed to Jesus is one man: "*John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!*"

Then Mark describes the circumstances that led to John's execution. John, in his prophetic role, had publically denounced the marriage of Herod and Herodias. Herodias had divorced Herod's own brother, Philip, and married Herod.

Some background is necessary to make sense of this. Let's let the Reformation Study Bible clarify this: "Herodias was a daughter of Aristobulus, one of the sons of Herod the Great. Other sons of Herod the Great included Herod Antipas and Herod Philip (by different wives). After marrying her half-uncle Herod Philip, Herodias left him for an adulterous relationship with his brother, Herod Antipas. Such were the loose morals, typical of the Herodian dynasty, against which John the Baptist preached."

John's problem with the marriage of Herod to Herodias is that it was clearly incestuous, and not permitted by Mosaic Law (cf. [Leviticus 18:16, 20](#)). As the head of state in Galilee and Perea, ruling over the Jewish people, he was violating Jewish religious law. Obviously, to John the Baptist, the head of state had a moral obligation to set an example and live a moral life.

Curiously, King Herod found this eccentric preacher admirable! One can only imagine Queen Herodias nagging Herod and trying to persuade him to execute the Prophet. She was personally offended at his moralizing. And yet, *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.* Still, he has John arrested and imprisoned.

We may be reminded of another member of the House of Herod who will come many years later, when the Apostle Paul is arrested and must defend himself before the Roman Procurator Festus, and King Agrippa and his sister/wife Bernice — Herod Agrippa II was the son of Agrippa I and great-grandson of Herod the Great, and Bernice was the oldest daughter of Herod Agrippa I, Agrippa's own sister! So this will not be the last time a holy man will have to confront the royal house of the Herods! (Acts 25-25). And like Herod Antipas, Herod Agrippa finds the man of God to be strangely compelling.

However, Herod's attempts to protect John the Baptist are thwarted when his wife Herodias finds his "Achilles Heel." Is it lust, or merely indulgence of his niece/daughter Salome? What we know is that Herod makes a rash vow when Salome dances before Herod and his dinner guests.

Was he serious in offering *up to half my kingdom*? If so, how intense must the hatred of Herodias have been for John the Baptist, when she tells her daughter to say "*I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.*"

For the sake of his pride, Herod will not revoke his oath, although he was *greatly distressed*. John is beheaded, the first martyr of the New Testament.

Mark's Gospel further adds *John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb*.

This is significant because John was a powerful voice for God, preparing the way for the Messiah at the beginning of Jesus' ministry: "*After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*" (Mark 1:7-8). John's death forecasts the cross of Jesus; and the need for the followers of John to now begin to follow Jesus.

APPLY:

In American culture, the relationship between religion and politics is complicated. Many cite the First Amendment of the Constitution as justification for a "wall of separation" between church and state — as Thomas Jefferson once wrote in a letter to Baptist pastors.

However, on issues of morality, does the church not have a moral imperative to speak? Do pastors not have an obligation to speak on issues they deem to have moral implications?

The answer throughout American history has been unequivocally clear. American Christians have spoken out on issues of slavery, civil rights, women's rights, child labor, abortion, the environment, homosexuality.

Whatever the President, the Congress, or the Supreme Court may do is one thing. What Christians must do is dictated by a Higher Law. Christians cannot avoid the tough call on moral issues that are decided by our representatives and our judges.

In our country, however, freedom of speech is guaranteed by the same First Amendment that separates church and state. Dissent does not result in state-sponsored martyrdom!

The same can't be said for Christians who speak up for their faith in many places around the world: Indonesia, the Middle East, Africa, for example.

The bottom line is that Christians must be prepared to "speak truth to power" on moral issues, even if there are consequences. However, I am quick to add that we must always *speak the truth in love*, as Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:15.

RESPOND:

Speaking out about the moral issues of our day, especially when our elected officials or our appointed judiciary or our culture seem to be trending away from our own values, can be difficult.

We do well to remember that John found it not only difficult. He found it to be fatal.

If we are clear in our own minds about two things, we should be ok. As I cited above — speak the truth in love. If our speech is grounded in the Holy Scriptures as we understand them, and if we always season our speech with love rather than condemnation or judgment, we will at least maintain a healthy balance.

But speak we must if we are to be faithful in this our time.

Lord, clarify my thoughts so that I speak according to your will and not spout my own fallible opinions. But at the same time, give me the courage to speak the truth in love about the moral issues of our day. Even if it means being unpopular. Amen.

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<https://soarlectionarybiblestudy.wordpress.com/2015/07/11/gospel-for-july-12-2015/>