

## Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> July – Sixth Sunday after Trinity

### Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you knew someone was doing something wrong and you had to decide whether to do anything about it? This week a trio of young boys were seen shoplifting in a local shop. The shop owner posted CCTV images of the boys on social media, hoping that someone would know who they were. I don't know whether anyone recognised them and did anything about it. It takes courage to speak up when someone else is in the wrong, especially if that person is more powerful than you or you know there will be consequences for you.

John the Baptist was in prison because he had told King Herod it was against the law for him to marry his brother's wife – it is illegal now and it was illegal then. Herod, like some current politicians, didn't want to hear this and thought he was above the law, so he decided to get the whistleblower out of the way. He locked John up to shut him up, but didn't go any further even though his new wife wanted to have John executed. It is interesting what Mark tells us: Herod feared John because he knew he was a righteous and holy man, he liked to listen to him, but found what he said perplexing. Let's unpack that: John's message was one of repentance for sins because the Messiah had come. Herod found this interesting, but perplexing – we know Herod would later find Jesus equally fascinating and would be pleased when Pilate sent Jesus to him, hoping to see Jesus perform some miracle. Herod seems to regard these men as some kind of court entertainer, but he knows their message is more serious than that. He understands that John is holy and righteous, which is why he is unnerved when John tells him he is doing wrong. Herod must know he shouldn't have married his brother's wife. He's in a politically vulnerable position – he is a puppet Jewish king in a country under Roman occupation – he doesn't need a popular prophet going about telling everyone he has no respect for the law. I think there is something deeper than that too – John is a holy man, Herod is not behaving in a holy way – what deeper fear of God perhaps makes him want to silence this nagging voice in his head?

It has to be said Herod doesn't go down in history as one of the great world leaders. He makes what turns out to be a very foolish promise. He throws a party, drinks too much and tells Herodias (who may be his daughter or his niece) that she can have anything she wants, even half his kingdom. This would be foolish in any situation: it is not exactly his kingdom to give away. No doubt he expects her to ask for money or jewellery, but she goes to her mother, to whom her loyalty is absolute, and asks for John's head. Herod is shocked and upset - this never entered his head – but he is too proud to go back on his word in front of his guests, so he orders the execution of a holy, righteous and

innocent man. Look what happens later: when Herod first hears about Jesus, he immediately thinks it is John. This is not a rational response – he is haunted by the ghost of the holy man he has murdered.

Why does Mark tell us this? Herod doesn't come out of this account well, Mark doesn't mean him to. Mark wants us to know that some people thought Jesus was John – they were the same age, they may have looked alike, they were preaching a similar message. We know some people thought John might be the Messiah and if people were hoping the Messiah would overthrow the Romans and restore the kingdom (with a righteous king, not a corrupt one like Herod), they may well have thought it plausible that John could be raised from the dead and Herod was about to be put in his place. Of course, that is not what was on Jesus' agenda, but Jesus too would be silenced by corrupt politicians who were not interested in truth and justice so much as preserving their own power. Speaking truth to power is almost always dangerous, but it matters. If we see wrong being done and do nothing when we have the option of doing something, we collude with it.

We have a higher calling, to speak out for truth and justice, to call out wrongdoing and corruption, to speak up for those who feel they have no power. We need to write to our MP and to the newspapers, sign petitions and join campaigns, but they need to be the right ones. If we are joining a campaign that promotes our own interests, we should always check that against who might be losing out and what might best serve the common good. If we are campaigning for someone else's well-being, we will probably be on the right track. I am reminded of Bishop Alan Smith's campaign to reduce the amount you can lose in a gambling machine or Marcus Rashford's campaign for free school meals in the holidays.

What else have you heard about that sounds just plain wrong? Perhaps cuts to special needs budgets in schools, the end of the £20 Universal Credit uplift, suggested immigration centres in Rwanda, dangerous cladding on buildings, nurses' pay. And on the other side of the coin? Boris Johnson's wallpaper and holiday villa, allegations of bullying at the Home Office, anything Dominic Cummings says – isn't he an extraordinary man?

Who speaks the truth to these people? The media? Backbenchers? The opposition? Should it be the bishops? Maybe we are all called to have a little bit of John in us, to call out what is wrong in our national life, but also on a local level, in our schools and workplaces, on councils and committees, even perhaps in our families. We are unlikely to have our heads served up on a plate, but there might still be a cost in speaking out. We have to ask what we might gain for someone else and to play our part in the growing of God's kingdom here on earth.