

Sunday 14 July - Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Liz Barnes

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

The contrast between our reading from Ephesians and our Gospel reading is stark and inescapable. The glorious and expansive vision of all the blessings described in Ephesians was not the experience of John, or indeed of Herod and his family, who were locked into a cycle of fear and revenge.

Each Advent we encounter John the Baptist and observe his key role as the forerunner of Jesus, and in our Gospel reading this morning we realise that his message was not the only way in which his role was played out. Here too, in his death, John goes ahead of Jesus. Throughout the gospels we see the ways in which Jesus ran into conflict with authorities around him. John the Baptist also provoked conflict with authorities, though admittedly, different ones from those who opposed Jesus, and in this story, we see the outcome. Jesus' death is far from inevitable at this point but, with the death of John, its shadow begins to fall across his path, a shadow that will get steadily darker and deeper from now on.

The story of John the Baptist is like a sub-plot for the story of Jesus. The birth of each of them brings strange prophecies; they begin their mission with popularity and draw crowds to them; gradually the uncompromising nature of their preaching arouses hostility in the authorities and brings their death. The killing of John the Baptist is told vividly and spares no detail of its horror. The malice of Herodias is more disquieting even than the brutality of the beheading-here is human spite and anger at its worst.

The beheading of John is grisly. It recounts an action of pure injustice, inspired by malice and carried out through foolishness. It has no happy ending and, does not seem to be resolved elsewhere in the Gospel. We often expect Bible stories to find resolution through healing, forgiveness or reconciliation, but this story has no such conclusion. It ends with cruelty and the best efforts of the oppressed to put a dignified face on things. It acts as a stark reminder that such things do happen.

Herod knew John to be a righteous and holy man. But he allows himself to be manipulated by Herodias and her daughter. Herod is caught between the position in which he has found himself in life... and the desire to have things work out right for him and his people. He knows what is morally right but walks down a path that is destructive of dignity, self-respect and relationships as well as of reputation. He is compelled to listen to the teaching of John the Baptist and appears to be attracted by what he hears, but he cannot let go of his securities and fears. A man of power and apparent strength, he is shown to be weak, vacillating between what is right and what is expedient.

Consider the personal and social dilemmas in which Herod finds himself. He is trying to negotiate a myriad of complicated relationships within his household and society and discovering that it is quite difficult to please everyone around him and still uphold his own personal standards. Herod was faced with choices that were too hard to make. He couldn't satisfy everybody and couldn't have everything he wanted. In the end rather than make a choice, he found himself cornered by competing obligations and found that the decision had been made for him.

If we are honest with ourselves, we too can recognise in Herod the sorts of dilemmas and choices we and those who lead our world face. The dilemmas and choices between right and wrong, between generosity and fear, between freedom of clear conscience and the imprisonment of guilt. Although very challenging at its most profound we must hold Herod up as a mirror to ourselves and all who are in power.

The story of John the Baptist is a warning against petty irritations that can swell into hatred, and the weakness that gives way to evil for the sake of peace and personal reputation. It is also a reminder to pray for those who still suffer for the name of Christ.

Daily life presents each one of us and our world with a series of Herod-like personal, corporate and spiritual dilemmas to negotiate. Across our lifespan, many of us, from time- to- time question who we are and how we should act as life pushes and pulls us in conflicting directions. And as in Herod's struggle, there are lives at stake as we decide which actions we will take.

The challenge for us as the body of Christ is to read our own decisions in-light-of that same story and to then ask ourselves whether the choices, we are making are self-protective, or part of God's transformation of the world.

There is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected even though we may not recognize this moment. When faced with the dark side of human life, in this case Herod's adultery with his brother's wife and the imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist, it is tempting to gloss over the details and go straight to the moral of the story. In doing so, we often miss opportunities to see what is hidden in plain sight, namely, the stream of grace that flows within the deep recesses of the narrative and that can apply in our own lives too.

Amen