

Proper 10B: Mark 6 :14-29  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **No Pension for Prophets**

Some years ago, students in a university creative writing class were asked to write a concise essay containing the following elements: 1. Religion 2. Royalty 3. Sex and 4. Mystery. The students worked furiously for the duration of the class. At the end, when they all turned in their essays, one stood out. Whereas the other papers were all several pages long, this one was but a few lines. It read: 'My God," said the Queen, "I'm pregnant. I wonder who did it!" The student got an "A"....

Those same themes still intrigue us today. They are what sells newspapers in any event, especially when they are combined. Royalty, which we might expand to include any celebrity: almost any story about a member of a royal family or movie star or pop singer will sell papers and garner clicks. And there's nothing like a sex scandal, even in our "anything goes" society, that piques our attention, especially if it's to do with people in high places. And even though matters of faith and God have slipped down the ratings in recent years, religion is still a topic of interest, or simply curiosity...especially if the story involves sex and celebrity. And mystery, who doesn't enjoy a good mystery? Unsolved murders, alien abduction, government conspiracies... Not knowing invites us to speculate and make up answers about the unknown.

It just so happens that all four of those elements—royalty, sex, mystery, and religion—are present our Gospel lesson this morning.

Jesus, you'll recall from last week, sent out his disciples two-by-two to the surrounding Galilean villages, to preach the Gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons. Mark here interrupts that story to relate some gossip that was circulating throughout Galilee just as the news of the disciples' preaching and miracle-working was getting out.

There was little, you understand, that was private in first-century Galilee. Our notions of privacy are in fact a modern invention. Until a few hundred years ago, just about everyone lived in small towns where everyone knew what everyone else was doing, and everyone heard what was going on in the world by talking to neighbors and strangers, gossiping in marketplaces, and passing on stories of anything curious or striking. And that was true for the goings on at court, too, despite efforts of royals to keep gossip from spreading. And so when there was a scandal at court, you can expect that news of it would have been round the palace within minutes, round the neighborhood by morning, and round all Galilee within a day or two. If it happened today, it would be all over the newspapers and covered on all the major cable news networks.

The scandal Mark relates in this morning's reading was a sordid, shabby and shameful affair—exactly the sort of thing that everybody likes to hear! however much they pretend otherwise. John the Baptist, the wild-eyed prophet and cousin to Jesus, had gotten into some hot water when he criticized Herod's marriage to Herodias. Herodias, Mark tells us, had been married to Herod's

brother, but Mark neglects to point out that Herod was himself already married, to a Nabatean princess. So Herod and Herodias' affair was all kinds of wrong. John took issue with it, and was arrested because of his outspoken criticism. Actually, it wasn't Herod who took offense, so much as it was his wife who didn't like being called out by the Judean prophet. She hated him for exposing her shameful behavior. Only Herodias couldn't just get rid of him, because he was in her husband's custody. And Herod, curiously, liked to listen to him. It seems Herod recognized that John was a righteous and holy prophet, and maybe a part of him knew John was speaking the truth, that he spoke for God. He didn't want to admit it, but he couldn't ignore the sense that he would be doing something deeply wrong, deeply offensive to God if he let his wife take out her revenge on John.

So Herodias waited, bided her time, until an opportunity arose to get her revenge. That opportunity came one night, on Herod's birthday, when he was celebrating with his courtiers and officers. Herod's step-daughter and niece, called Salome elsewhere, danced for him and his guests, and he was so pleased by it, that he promised her half his kingdom. He was no doubt drunk and likely trying to show off for his guests. But when the young Salome consulted her mother, Herodias knew exactly what she should ask for: her enemy's head on a platter, literally.

This put Herod in a pickle. He feared killing John, for he knew he was a prophet of God. But he also feared losing face among his dinner guests. He'd promised Herodias' daughter anything and she asked *merely* for the head of someone he'd already condemned as a criminal. A small favor for a first-century ruler to give. Yet he hesitated...though not for long. Fear of appearing weak before his companions won out, and John was done for. You can just hear the whispers, the rumors, the shaking of heads, the mutterings that no good would come of it.

However scandalous Herod's actions may have been, his behavior is far from surprising. Fear of losing face, looking weak, has bedeviled leaders and politicians throughout history. I remember reading about Lyndon B Johnson in college in a course on the presidency. Historians love to speculate about the psychological faults of Richard Nixon, but Nixon had nothing on LBJ. In a recent volume of "The Years of Lyndon Johnson," biographer Robert Caro makes it clear that much of what drove and animated Johnson was a deep-seated fear of never looking like a failure, of never being seen as a failure the way his own father had been. That fear was what kept him from seeking the Democrat nomination for President in 1960. He wanted it desperately but dared not say it out loud for fear that if he didn't get it, people would look down on him. That was bad enough, but Caro tells us that this fear of failure—the fear of becoming his father all over again—was also why so many tens of thousands of young men would lose their lives in Vietnam. Johnson could not back down—not even when backing down was the most eminently sensible thing to do as others could see clearly.

I don't want to get too off track, debating the Vietnam War. My point is only that when a leader is insecure and morally weak, they tend to make bad decisions, decisions based on the approval of others, not on what is right. It takes courage, moral courage, to stand up against social pressure, to let go of the need to be loved and respected. As CS Lewis observed: "Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point.... Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently." It takes courage, standing up to the fear of disappointing others, of suffering

shame, of losing others' approval, of being cancelled, for standing up for the truth. John had that courage, Herod did not. And it just so happened that, within a decade, Herod suffered a humiliating defeat by the Nabateans, his first wife's people, lost his throne and was banished with Herodias to faraway Gaul, left to die in disgrace in a distant land. Conversely, within a generation, John's story had been written up by Mark, honoring him as a fearless witness to the kingdom of God.

The differing fates of Herod and John the Baptist are instructive, a lesson in themselves. But to see this story merely as morality tale ignores the larger context, which is the question of What does it mean to be king? What does godly kingship look like? To see this, let's return to John, to what got him in trouble with the powers-that-be. John was taken into custody because he objected to Herod's second marriage to his brother's wife. What was it that made this so bad? Herod's father, Herod "the Great," not only abandoned his first wife and child, but ended up having at least eight wives, one of which he had executed along with several of his own children. With that as your comparison, what Herod Jr did doesn't seem so bad, does it? But it wasn't simply that Herod's marriage to Herodias was immoral, illegal, and a bad example to the Jewish public. It went beyond that.

You see, Herod, following his father, cherished a great ambition: to have the Jews recognize him as their true king. You see, despite Mark's calling him *King* Herod, Herod was not, technically, a king. He was a tetrarch, a local ruler. In fact, it was his petition to the Emperor to make him "king" that got him exiled. In hindsight, we can see there was never a chance of the Jews accepting Herod as their king, but he must have thought it at least possible. That is why, incidentally, he was intent on completing his father's great project, rebuilding the Temple, because the Temple had been closely associated with royalty ever since Solomon built the first temple a thousand years before.

Meanwhile, John the Baptist was launching a very different kind of kingdom-movement. His baptizing penitents, offering them forgiveness of sins, was effectively upstaging the Temple itself, taking attention—and power—away from the religious establishment by means of his grassroots revival. The message he preached, the heralding of the arrival of the Messiah, pointed to a very different king from Herod. Would God's Anointed One really behave in such a fashion? Would the Messiah *marry his brother's wife*?

No wonder John irritated Herod and Herodias so. He was exposing Herod for the pretender he was. Nevertheless, Herod had enough Jewish sensibility about him, enough fear of God, to listen to John's words, torn between his anxiety at what John was saying and a strange compulsion to go on listening. But then came *the day*, with the party, the guests, the wine, the famous dance, the rash promise, and the executioner's grim trip to the dungeon. It goes to show that, while the kingdoms of the world are indeed to become the Kingdom of God, those who speak of this, who announce God's rule, who rub worldly rulers' noses in their shame, pointing out their failings, their falling short of true kingship—such prophets are likely to bear the wrath of the powers-that-be. Those in power don't much like being reminded that their "power" is only temporary and limited at that. There's a reason why there are no pensions for prophets. They don't live long enough to collect on them!

That said, it's curious that we aren't told what John said when the executioner came for him. His response is not part of the story, as it is with other stories of Jewish righteous men who, before they were killed, affirmed their faith and warned of God's justice. But Mark leaves his readers in no doubt. John was a righteous and holy man, and the kingdom of which he spoke, and the forgiveness he offered, were the reality that would win the day. And so, even in such a solemn and ugly story as we have in today's Gospel, there can be found real encouragement to faithful witness and constant hope.

Indeed, the sordid and shameful way John the Baptist dies, the victim of others' connivance and cowardice, prepares us for Jesus' death, for how the political ruler, religious leaders, and the mob colluded to put the Son of God to death, a scandal and miscarriage of justice if ever there was one.

And yet, Mark, in telling this story, is not merely preparing us for Jesus' suffering; he is looking further, to the little communities of Christians he knew, the first churches, who were facing their own persecution and hardship because, like John, they had the courage to proclaim the kingdom-message, because they boldly pointed out that Jesus, not any king or president, is in charge. They declared God's judgment on human pride and folly, chose not to live a lie but to tell the truth, and suffered the consequences for it.

Mark assured these believers that they were in good company, that God hadn't abandoned them, that God was surely with them, and they would ultimately be vindicated. And in the same way, this story gives comfort and strength to Christians around the world today who also face pressure, persecution and death on account of their faith. When the true King comes into his power, they will rejoice for they have a place in his kingdom. May God grant us such courage that we might overcome our fears and be kingdom witnesses, too. Amen.