

Pentecost 6 Year B 2009
Texts: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
Psalm 24
Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6: 14-29

“The King was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not to refuse her.” Mark 6: 26

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

This morning’s gospel reading is known as one of the “terrible” texts of the Bible. This reading, along with Herod’s killing of the innocents, are stories that many think the Bible could have done without.

Where is the Good News in such a gory story? When I polled the clergy in my weekly lectionary group as to who would preach on Herod’s beheading of John or who would preach on the reading from Second Samuel, hands down, the Old Testament reading had more votes.

But the stories in the Bible, every one of them, are there for a reason. Every one of them points to a greater truth and a greater power than sometimes is obvious at first blush.

This story in Mark is important because it points to the faith of John the Baptist. I heard a pastor say about this reading from Mark, “we will not honor the violence of this story, but we will honor the faith.”¹ And today, here at St. Matthew’s, we will honor the truth that sometimes living a faithful and true life can lead to a difficult and painful death.

There are many similarities in today’s Old Testament and Gospel readings. Both have dancing; David is dancing in joy to God and Herodias is dancing in entertainment for her step-father’s guests in honor of Herod’s birthday. There is nothing in the text, by the way, to suggest that her dance was seductive or sexual in any way. What the text does state is that she danced so well that she “pleased Herod and his guests.”

Both stories revolve around banquets.

¹ Sing For Joy broadcast on KFUE 7/12/09

David had brought the Ark of the Lord to the city bearing his name. In thanksgiving for having the Ark in his presence, David blesses the people and hands out to all people, male and female, bread, meat and raisin cakes.

That men and women were specified is important to note. Usually food was distributed only to the head of the family and then brought home for the women of the household to prepare. Here we see that women are considered part of “the whole multitude of Israel.” All people were to be a part of the blessing, all people were to benefit from having God in their midst.

Herod’s banquet is a birthday banquet. He invites the elite of Galilee, officers, courtiers and the town’s leaders, an exclusive group to be sure, to share in his celebration.

Both stories revolve around very human, very fallible men. Both were Jews. Both had stolen a married woman away from her rightful husband, and both killed to get what they wanted. But there is a huge difference between David and Herod. David was considered Holy. David was holy but he was not blameless.² David, when confronted about his sins admitted them, turned back to God and repented.

Herod chose the easy way out. Herod let his past errors box him in and define his actions. Herod thought more about what was politically expedient rather than what was faithful and wise. Herod was neither holy nor blameless.³

David at some level, believed there was another way to live, a way that expanded life and served God. Herod believed that the only way to live was to shrink the power of those against him. Herod believed in a way of life that only served his purposes.

But before we think about bashing Herod too much, I think if we are really honest with ourselves, we would admit that perhaps we are far more like Herod than David.

² E-mail essay from Rev. Emery Washington 7/11/09 “We Can Make The World A Better Place In Which To Live

³ ibid

It wasn't that Herod didn't have any conscience. The text tells us that he like listening to John, that he found him perplexing but very interesting. We are also told that Herod knew that John was "a righteous and holy man, and he protected him." We are also told that when he made his foolish oath about giving Herodias, his stepdaughter, up to half his kingdom and was told that what was desired was John's head, that he was "deeply grieved."

He didn't want to do this, but rather than seem weak in front of the Galilean elite he gave Herodias what she asked for. In order to save face he caved in and did something he didn't really want to do.

Which one of us can say that we haven't caved into some type of pressure, real or perceived, and done something we wish we hadn't?

Which one of us can truthfully say that under peer or professional pressure, or concern for one's career and advancement, we didn't wrestle with what was expedient over what was right? Peer pressure, which is immense for our adolescents and young adults, doesn't stop there. All of us want to be liked. All of us seek approval and belonging. All of us make mistakes.

The difference between David and Herod was that David, when shown the truth, when shown how he had fallen short of serving God, admitted it and tried to do better. He wasn't always successful, but he was repentant. Herod couldn't face his errors and what making different choices might mean for him and his kingdom. Herod wanted to believe, but for him the consequences were too high.

All of our choices have consequences, all of them. We may do something for 100% the right reasons. It may be 100% the right thing to do. But what today's gospel reading tells us is that we need to know, acknowledge, and be aware that serving God, speaking truth to power, can come with deadly consequences.

Last week we celebrated the birth of our country. I read once that the majority of the founding fathers of this country died in ruins, many of them penniless. They made a decision, however, that dying for the principle of freedom was more important than living without it. They

made decisions based not on what was expedient for them, but what would benefit future generations. They spoke truth to the greatest power on earth at that time and many would not live to see the fruits of their truth telling. All of our decisions have consequences. All of them.

Mark is a masterful storyteller. Where he puts a story is as important as what the story tells. The story of John speaking truth to power, of speaking up against Herod and how it was unlawful to take his brother's wife while his brother was still alive, is placed immediately after the stories of the unbelief of who Jesus is in his hometown and the sending of the 12 who heal in Jesus' name, and it immediately precedes the feeding of the 5000.

This is no accident. Herod's banquet is in stark relief to the banquet of God. Herod's feeding the elite of the day is no match for David's feeding all of Israel and Jesus' feeding of all humanity. Everyone is fed in the kingdom of God. Everyone. Even the Herod's of the world are invited.

So, where is the Good News in this rather gory story?

The Good News is that, unlike Herod, we don't have to let our past mistakes box us in and dictate who we are and what we are to become. We don't have to let our embarrassment and shame define the life we lead.

The Good News is that with God's help, we don't have to choose what is expedient, that we can choose what is faithful, which is what is ultimately wise. We can decide that dying for the freedom we are offered in Jesus Christ is more important than living without him.

The Good News is that there is a different kingdom and different King that we worship and adore and whose life, death and resurrection make all the difference in the life we choose to live. The Good News is that the powers and principalities of this world may take our life but they cannot take our faith.

The Good News is that the banquet we are invited to, the banquet we serve every week here at this dinner table, will feed us and nurture us and be more extravagant than we could ever imagine.

And for that I say, “Thanks be to God!”

Amen.