

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 11th July 2021
The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Creator God,
you made us all in your image:
may we discern you in all that we see,
and serve you in all that we do;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his

oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Sermon

The Bible is full of some of the most unlikely stories. Every time I find myself faced with this morning's gospel reading, the utterly perplexing story of John the Baptist's death, I can't help wondering about the writer's intention in including it. Over Easter, the 1961 epic King of Kings, which tells the story of Jesus, was on the television, and it seemed that this scene took on disproportionate significance, as the daughter of Herodias beguiled Herod with her dancing. In some ways its appeal to a television audience was obvious, but I remained unconvinced. And yet, as I said a couple of weeks ago, Mark has written the shortest of the gospels. He doesn't waste words. So it's worth pausing to ask ourselves why he has given such attention to this event.

We know that the Bible is best approached as a library of books, rather than a single volume. Within that library we find different kinds of writing – history, poetry, apocalyptic, prophecy – and we approach each in a different way as we seek to make sense of its meaning. Within those different kinds of literature, the Bible tells us the story of God. And it also tells us the story of human beings. It is this latter part which feels important as we explore this morning's gospel reading.

During Lent, as you know, I ran a course on the parables. Jesus chose an extraordinarily powerful way to teach, because by telling parables, he was not providing a once-for-all answer, but rather inviting his followers to engage with the questions and begin to work out answers for themselves. The invitation is to enter into the story; to seek to make sense of it from the various perspectives; and to allow what we discover to shape our lives and decisions. As those of us who explored the parables discovered, it is both helpful and unhelpful that there is a meaning behind the parables. While we were sometimes confident that we understood what Jesus was trying to say, at other times we found ourselves with more questions than answers.

This morning's gospel reading is not a parable, but rather an account of events. Yet I wonder whether it is included as an invitation to enter into what is, in fact, a very human story and allow our discoveries to shape our lives.

The way that we read stories has an impact on what we are able to learn. The pages of the internet are full of sensationalised stories of all kinds of misdemeanours, from the behaviour of politicians to celebrities. Opinions are thrown in our faces, from outrage to righteous indignation. And yet, while the drama captures our attention, it is all too easy to make these stories about "the other" – about people who aren't like us. The tone in which they are written invites judgement, not engagement and our response says a whole lot more about us than it does about the people involved.

If we're not careful, we can find ourselves doing exactly the same with the story of John the Baptist's death. This is a story of other people, in another place, at another time. We can stand apart, knowing that John the Baptist has been wronged, and that we are on the side of right.

And yet I wonder. Perhaps we need to be brave enough to actually enter into the story and allow it to ask questions of us. Even to allow it to change us. Because it really is a very human story. And, while we may not want to admit it, we can probably relate all too easily to some of the main characters.

Let's start with Herod. It's worth knowing that this is Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great – and not the first choice as heir. Interesting, isn't it, how just a little information can change

our perspective. Because now, if we try to step into his shoes, we might begin to understand that his behaviour might have been shaped by family relationships – he has a chip on his shoulder. This is not to excuse anything that he does, but part of entering into a story is an act of empathy. And anyone who has had a powerful, successful parent; or felt inadequate alongside other family members might bring a particular perspective to this story.

If we stand outside of the story, we see Herod's weakness; his desire for power and status; that in the end he stands up for nothing because he cares too much about how others see him. Yet from the inside there is a more complex picture. He admires John the Baptist – even fears him. There is a sense in which he has actually been touched by the good news that John brings. Just not quite enough. Not enough to remain faithful to his first wife, rather than taking his brother's wife. Not enough to see the deviousness in the daughter of Herodias. Not enough to acknowledge when he has got something wrong, rather than taking his oath to its logical conclusion.

When we want to stand apart from Herod, it is because we don't want to acknowledge that in some ways we've probably been there, too. Whether it's because we've found something else more attractive than our discipleship, or held to a rule at the expense of something more important, most of us can relate in some way to Herod – uncomfortable though it undoubtedly is.

And if it's true for Herod, it is also true for the other characters in the story. The jealousies and ambitions that we would rather not acknowledge, but that enable us to understand Herodias; perhaps the occasions when we have got our own way through less than open means. The story of the death of John the Baptist is a human story, and it is therefore one that we understand all too well. It's inclusion encourages us to ask questions of ourselves; to understand one another better; to be compassionate and forgiving, as well as considering where we find God within these people's lives.

We are also helped to understand this story better this week because it is set alongside a passage from the opening of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. These two readings are so very different. A human story, placed alongside the opening of a letter in which Paul sets the scene for the Ephesians, telling them about the blessings that come through God in Christ. It is sweeping in its scope, reminding us that we are all a part of the larger story of God.

Each of us will know which of these readings we find more accessible; easier to understand; which it is that we prefer to read. Perhaps we can all recognise that the reading from Ephesians is grand and inspiring, yet perhaps a little impersonal, while the story of John the Baptist's death is sensual and compelling, yet also uncomfortable.

Our scriptures contain both kinds of writing because it helps us to grow in faith. To grow in our relationship with God. And because they can help us to interpret one another. This week I have invited you to place yourselves into the story of John the Baptist's death, to seek to better understand each individual within that story, and allow it to speak into your own life experiences. And that exercise is undertaken knowing that we are all also a part of a much larger narrative. The story of God, of Jesus and of salvation. In our journey of faith, we hold on to both. We need to know the saving power of God, in order to place our human weakness into a wider context. And in so doing, time and again, we draw ever closer to God, allowing our responses to be shaped by God's love and grace.

Amen