

John the Baptist

Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29

The Biblical drama that is the story of the life of John the Baptist has been described as a, "potpourri of sexual lust, seduction, political ambition, scandal, and murder..."ⁱ The story has provided endless inspiration for artists and writers ancient and modern. Titian, Caravaggio, and Gustave Moreau, among others, painted it; Oscar Wilde wrote a famous play about it, *Salome*, that Richard Strauss used as the basis of his very successful opera. In 1953 Rita Hayworth played Salome in a film, with Herod and his wife Herodias played by Charles Laughton and Judith Anderson. Even if you don't know the Bible story, watching the film you just know that with the Hunchback of Notre Dame and Mrs Danvers playing the lead villains, it's not going to end well for John the Baptist. Salome dances for Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who you will remember from the Nativity stories. Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils seals the prophet's fate when Salome, at her mother's instigation, demands as her reward the head of John the Baptist, who had previously insulted Herodias.

This passage is sometimes described as a 'text of terror'. It exposes the dark side of human's life, here the adultery of Herod with his brother's wife and the unjust imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist. But who was this man, and where did he come from, and what does his story have to say to us today?

He was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a late child. Elizabeth was related to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Zechariah was a priest in the Jerusalem Temple. John the Baptist, it might be claimed, was a son of privilege, since both his parents were part of the priestly families of Israel. Might it be the case that closeness to the religious establishment led to John's mistrust and active dislike

of what they had done to the ancient Jewish faith? A focus on empty sacrifice and ritual when it should be something more deeply spiritual and stripped down to its essentials – being in a humble and right relationship with God.

Leaving the comforts of home, John is associated with a desert ministry. He may have been close to a radical sect of Judaism called the Essenes, active around the barren Dead Sea. They practised regular baptism – full immersion – a symbol of being washed clean of sin. They also started writing down the words of Scripture – and it is to them that the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the 1940s, is attributed.

John's ministry was unafraid of speaking out against religious, or political authority. Some have said he was the last of the Old Testament style prophets. Certainly, style echoes men like Amos, whose ministry in ancient Israel was metaphorically to drop a plumb line down against the state of the nation, religious and political, to see whether it stood true to God.

John the Baptist had followers. Andrew, our patron saint, was one. He was with John at the baptisms taking place at the River Jordan when Jesus, who was John's cousin, appeared for baptism. It is into John's mouth that the gospels put John's description of Jesus: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." John knew what he saw in Jesus: one greater than he would be. John is the signpost, out there in the wilderness, watered by the Jordan, dressed in rough camel skins, eating locusts and honey. "After me comes He who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down to untie." From a man who had been drawing crowds from Jerusalem, intrigued and inspired by his clear preaching, John was a humble man. He spoke words that demanded to be heard by a society grown soft, or indifferent, to what God was doing in its day.

This King Herod is also worthy of a look. He is caught in a myriad of complex relationships. He has a sneaking respect for John the Baptist, but his wife Herodias hates the prophet. He wants to be seen as a trustworthy, generous, even a little religious by Galilean society, but is unnerved by John's unequivocal preaching which might call in Roman interference. He wants to be a generous host, and keep his word, and yet is caught out by his wife's and daughter's superior political skills. Herod is caught in a web of relationships that seem to render him a 'reactor' rather than an 'actor' in the drama of life.ⁱⁱ

Such complexities are still seen in our world today. The handling of the Israel-Palestine conflict sees world leaders wrestling with condemning the Hamas kidnappings and also the Israeli army's indiscriminate (though they maintain otherwise) bombing of civilian targets; and the need to support the democratically elected government of the Israeli state which is also undemocratically depriving native Palestinians, Arab and Christian, of their property through illegal settlements. Or the global condemnation of the wickedness of Vladimir Putin and his assault on Ukraine, made murky by a need for the Western need of Russian gas, and a fear of not triggering an unintended nuclear war. The opposition of tyrannies have multiple consequences, not all of them intended or desirable.

Or bring Herod's dilemma down to a domestic level. For the harried mother of a toddler, there is the question of how best to love and parent a child in the face of a defiant, "No!" and a full-fledged temper tantrum in aisle 6 of a supermarket at the end of a long week. Or a father with children struggling to explain the importance of getting time off from work to go and support his children and a much-awaited sporting event. Or a Government wishing to sort out the crisis in the NHS, the Social Care system, the overcrowded prisons, the poor payment of council staff, and the creaking educational system, whilst not wanting to raise taxes on a population that some might

argue seems determined to have all the benefits with none of the sacrifice. Put in domestic terms, the dilemma of Herod is not so distant or unconnected to dilemmas we face now.

John the Baptist, saying it like it is, speaking the unspeakable truths, is a wonderful thing unless your life is directly impacted by the reality of what he is saying and meaning.

If only prophets would say the things that we *want* to hear, and not the things we *need* to hear.

If only prophets would recognise that life is not black and white, and is made up of murky shades, and compromises. If only prophets would understand that we are trying our best but sometimes good intentions and high principles – in the home, in the workplace, in the political world, in the church – are sometimes too costly, and too unrealistic, and so we fudge the issue, and hope not too many people notice.

Do we stand up for what we believe in, whatever the consequences, or do we accept the wisdom that it is better to back down and compromise, and live to fight another day?

How much more might John the Baptist have achieved had he apologized to Herodias, and been sent back to his desert ministry? How much higher in the eyes of the Galileans might Herod have risen if he had said to Herodias and Salome, "Sorry, my dears, it was the wine talking, and no, you can't have the head of John the Baptist. Here's half the kingdom instead"?

At this point in a sermon, you might be hoping for a neat resolution of this ethical conundrum. At this point in the sermon as I was writing, *I* was hoping for a neat resolution of this ethical conundrum. Is it wrong to yearn for social stability and equilibrium in our lives and the world over and against the messy, chaotic process of personal and social transformation that our faith insistently demands? Is this why, in Jesus' day, many were charmed and uplifted by His teaching, but when the clear demands of faith were made, they turned away, sadly, because it was too hard,

and their spiritual roots too shallow? Have we made faith and support of the Church too easy, by not asking too much; or too hard, by expecting more than people are prepared to commit?

This is the challenge of believing today. Unless someday God sets right what has gone so terribly wrong in this broken world, it is nonsensical to speak of God's love, let alone God's justice. There is too much wickedness that goes unanswered, too much violence that carries the day, too much evil that runs roughshod over the good. John the Baptist preached that in heaven the crooked shall be made straight. What then? Do we align ourselves with John the Baptist, and Jesus of Nazareth, whose work was bound up in setting things straight, and the re-creation of a whole new world, and second chances, and new beginnings?ⁱⁱⁱ Or not?

The challenge of John the Baptist, and Jesus of Nazareth Who followed him, continues to put these hard decisions before us – as individuals, as a nation, and as a Church. How we choose to answer is up to us. For standing up to his principles of speaking truth, John lost his head. For standing up to His principles of loving unequivocally, Jesus was crucified. Will we choose what is right, or what is expedient?

What a rotten way to finish a sermon before I go off on holiday! How we work these things out, as always, will be up to us.

And God, as always, will be there to remind, and to help.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Douglas John Hall, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 3, p236*

ⁱⁱ Karen Marie Yust, *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Bob Setzer, *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark, p180*