

Mark 6:14-29
July 11, 2021

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Among some pastors there has been a bit complaining this past week about today's Gospel reading.

Do we really need to talk about John being beheaded? Do we really need all of the gory details?

It does seem curious I guess that Mark, the one who is short on words, would actually include the whole story of John getting beheaded, but that is exactly what he did.

Why?

Well – if you have not yet read the entire Gospel of Mark in one sitting, I highly recommend you do so. It'll only take you 2 hours. That's like watching a movie. So instead of going to the AMC, just sit down in your nice comfy chair in the air conditioning and read Mark. Bonus points is you do it as a family and act it out. Trust me – so much more fun than going to the movies!

So, yes – Mark is very short on words. Words are precious to him. You'd think he was sending a telegram – or a Tweet. It's almost as if he was limited on how long his scroll was so he Readers Digested Jesus' story. But, that is not the case at all. The Gospel of Mark was crafted very deliberately and the words chosen are all there for a purpose.

So, what is going on?

Now, for all of you who heard last week's Gospel reading - what was going on in that first part of Mark chapter 6? Anyone remember?

Last week – Jesus went to his home town, but no one believed in him. Most people ignored him and Jesus was astonished by their unbelief. After that Jesus sends his disciples off to cast out demons and cure people. They were sent off with no provisions at all – like homeless people. Two by two they were sent as messengers of God's kingdom. They were sent to do God's work and they successfully performed miracles – lots of them.

Now, while all that was going on – while the disciples were sent off to live God’s kingdom and bring life to the world, something else was happening in the Roman “kingdom” that included Galilee. John was being beheaded.

So, just a few historical details. The Herod in today’s Gospel is not Herod the Great. This is his son Herod Antipas who was ruling the northern part of Israel that Rome had given to his father to rule. Herod the Great was the one who wanted to kill baby Jesus.

So, Herod Antipas, is one of the 3 sons that Herod the Great had who went on to rule over the area he had ruled for Rome after his death in the year 4. Herod Archelaus and Phillip are the other two brothers.

So there was Herod, Herod, and Philip. Almost makes you feel bad for Philip, doesn’t it? But he had a different mother than the Herods. Or maybe you don’t feel so bad for Philip, because Herod the Great, although a great builder, was a horrible murdering narcissist, and the two Herod boys didn’t fall too far from the tree.

Herod Archelaus was the one who killed 3000 people in the Temple after they tore down the eagle Archelaus put up at the entrance to the Temple Court. The eagle was the mark of Caesar Augustus. He was basically stating that Rome was more powerful than God. You can see why that might get him killed, especially after he killed 3000 Jews at their most holy spot. This is why Pontius Pilate was always locked up in the fortress of Caesarea Maritima where he could easily escape by boat on the Mediterranean Sea.

So, whereas we know quite a bit about the Herods – because there was a lot of intrigue - we do not know much about Philip. Philip was insignificant compared to any of the Herods – so much so that even his wife didn’t want anything to do with him. She was also related to Herod the Great as you can see by her name. You can’t say Herod the Great wasn’t egotistical.

So, we have two stories going on simultaneously – the Roman Empire and God’s Kingdom.

Everyone on the Roman side of the story is hungry for power, and they’ll do whatever it takes to get it and keep it, which is mainly through murder. The Pax Romana. Murder both silenced their opponents and scared everyone else into submission.

The crucifix is a clear example of that. It was a very intentional way of murdering commoners. It was public. It was horribly painful. And it was completely humiliating. John was perhaps lucky to only get his head chopped off – quick, easy, and in private. Totally the opposite of Jesus.

So, while Jesus has sent his disciples to go give life to the world, Herod Antipas has sent his guards to kill John. John whom he really liked, although didn't really get.

So, what we have happening in Mark 6 is a comparison of God's kingdom versus the Roman Empire. As you can see, it is quite the juxtaposition. One is about life and the other about death.

Mark is making it clear – If you want Rome for your king, you get murder. If you want God/Jesus as your king, you will have life and know real peace, not a fake peace that is put into place by threats of violence, but a peace that comes from unconditional love.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Mark is asking us to make a choice. Who are you going to follow? Do you want to die or do you want to live?

And Mark is set up so that when you get to the end, you want to run and tell the world that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! God is stronger than any empire. God alone is our king! And that is the good news we have to share.

Threats of violence have no power over us, because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! Because he lives, we live!

And so we are sent to bring life to the world. Real life that is made up of caring for one another. It is peaceful, not forceful. And it is free – free to give and to receive. There is no cost for God's kingdom.

It's grace, and grace is sufficient for us.

We do not need worldly power to be happy. That's not where true happiness lies. Joy comes from service to others. Joy is God's Kingdom.

When the disciples returned from their mission, they were overjoyed, along with every person they touched.

When Herod's soldiers returned with John's head, aside from Herodias, there was only mourning and gnashing of teeth, even by Herod himself.

And whereas Jesus sent his disciples to bring healing amid rejection, Herod kills John for his own approval. Herod could have rejected his niece/stepdaughter, but he was afraid of disappointing his guests. Fear.

When Jesus sends his disciples, it's not out of fear, but out of the confidence that comes from pure love.

In Baptism, we are sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit and we are sent in sure confidence to go and bring healing to the world. We are sent to make people complete. We are sent to bring the peace of Christ to everyone.

There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out all fear. (1 John 4:18) And then that love sends us to share that love in the world. That's God's Kingdom.

So, go in peace and serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.