

Pastor Roy's sermon from July 15, 2018

Why does Mark go into such detail about King Herod's execution of John the Baptist?

Herodias, King Herod's wife, hated John and wanted him dead. She liked her life the way she was living it and she didn't want him calling her or Herod to repent of their very nice lifestyles and their relationship which replaced the one she had with Herod's brother Philip. Herod didn't want to kill him. So when she gets the chance she uses his values against Herod to get what she wants. There is the birthday party, his daughter's dance, and the offer of a spectacular gift. In a few minutes John is dead.

Herod cares about his own power. If asked, it sounds like he cared much less about justice and the reign of God. John's death is regrettable to him, but keeping in the good graces of his powerful friends is more important. Despite his regret he likely enjoys, along with his guests, the power he has over this prophet. Everyone knows who is boss. Herod's wife also enjoys his power and her own.

Perhaps Mark includes this story of royal greed because it is so commonly different from the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Good News is radical openness to the world according to God rather than the world according to greed and fear. Herod lives in the complicated world of getting his own way by his own wits. How tempting it is to live our lives in that way. The temptation never goes away. It is our defensive nature to do whatever it takes to get what we feel we need. It is so tempting to use what power we have for our own benefit. That is why the prophets have always critiqued the kings. Because it is a rare king or queen that does not take advantage of the position.

To be faithful to God's love for everyone regardless of position, wealth, power, resources is to trust deeply in the mercy of God. John, Jesus so trusted. This is why our salvation comes from Jesus life, death and resurrection. Because he listened to God. He proclaimed this love, this faithfulness, this mercy. And so his life, death, and resurrection are our salvation. They lead us to the mercy of God so that we can be free from fear and be filled with a solid hope that does not disappoint. This is the Good News of the God's Reign.

John could have kept to himself his criticism of Herod. Jesus could have kept to himself his prophetic criticism of the religious leaders of his day. But they were more trusted more in God's Justice than with their own well-being or ability to make things happen. Both John and Jesus are free, and yet in the end, someone else makes a decision about whether they live or die.

This is a curious freedom. But our salvation and the mercy of God are revealed in this parable of power and freedom. It seems that most of the voices around us promise that if we do and have the right things, we will be secure and free.

But it turns out that those voices reflect Herod's Way rather than John and Jesus' way--the Kingdom, the Reign of God. The salvation of Jesus Christ marks us with the cross of Christ and his resurrection brings joy. The salvation of Herod and other political and religious leaders which fall short of Christ's cross and resurrection bring inward suffering leading to despair. Greed and fear do not lead to life and joy and peace. Mark is inviting us to listen to John and Jesus who gave of their lives as a sign of how to follow in the way of God's Justice, love, and mercy.

One last word, if you get a chance to read the opening chapter of Ephesians, take a few minutes to let it sink in. The writer explores Christ's death and resurrection as redemption, forgiveness, grace lavished. The writer speaks of God's plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. This is the justice of God in which we can place our trust. No one, nothing is left out.

The Good News is not about who is worthy to be gathered up into Christ, that is a given. All of creation is gathered up into Christ. Creation is an expression of the Spirit of Christ. The Good News is that our choices to stand with the weak and the powerless as did John and Jesus did will bring us joy. Yes, hard work and sacrifice, but the path of faithfulness brings joy and peace. Not necessarily good times or ease, as the lives of John and Jesus demonstrate, but the path to Joy and Peace is the path of deep trust in God. And when we fail, God will hold us fast, so that we can continue to learn to trust. Thanks be to God.