

We are called to tell and live out good news stories

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Pentecost + 8B – Mark 6 14-29 (Parallels Esther 1 & 5, 1 Kings 16)

We've just listened to a horrible story. But we finished by calling it the *Gospel of the Lord*: what Mark calls *the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. Mk1.1 So where's the good news in it? Is there something we didn't hear? Herod heard it. He heard people talking about Jesus' deeds of power and he said, *This is John, whom I beheaded. He's been raised from the dead*. A strange thing to say. What's it all about? Before we look at the story itself, it may also strike you as strange that just after Mark tells this horrible story, without any change of pace, we'll suddenly be back with the twelve again who've just returned to tell Jesus about their mission. 30 *[They] gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught*.

And then off they'll go with Jesus for a rest – which gets interrupted by the feeding of the five thousand. So although good news is actually something we don't meet in today's story, Mark has made *Good News* the context of Herod's violence – the frame. Today's violent story is surrounded with stories of healing and love and care. That's often something quite true to life. Where is God when terrible things happen to good people; I mean *really* good people? Mark's answer to that question is the context – the frame – he puts around this story. The good news is that God is still out there in good people doing kind, healing things. In a world of cruelty and malevolence, there *is* still a different voice; a voice that won't be silenced.

And this is the voice we can hear surrounding today's story, despite all attempts to suppress it. This voice exposes evil for what it is by declaring there is another truth. Some people try to stop this voice being heard. For Herod and Herodias, silencing John should have ended the matter, shouldn't it? What upstart tells the first family what they can and can't do; who's running the place anyway? So Herod locked him up. But even so, we're given some strange things to ponder. *19 Herodias had a grudge against [John], and wanted to kill him. But she couldn't, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When [Herod] heard [John], he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.*

What's going on? A Jewish historian of the time, Josephus, (Jewish Antiquities XVIII.v.1 – LCL 433, 77f) tells us that Herodias and Herod Antipas first met when he was on a trip to Rome. At that time, Herodias was married to his half-brother, Herod Philip (who was incidentally her uncle). Our Herod, Herod Antipas, had stopped at his brother's house on his journey, and while he was there, he fell for his sister in law Herodias (who was his niece too). He proposed and she accepted, but on condition that he dump his current wife. He agreed, and soon after he returned from Rome, that condition had been met. Then they were an item. *So much for the table of kindred and affinity!*

People who value their safety are careful who they speak to about the indiscretions of their rulers. But that's never an option for a prophet. John was busy preparing the nation to receive the Messiah; calling people to repentance. He had to speak truth where it counted. John the Baptist had to tell Herod personally that he'd done wrong. But where Herod would normally have killed John without compunction, we're told that he protected John from his wife's anger. As we know, when Herod heard John, *he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.*

John's message, which so enraged Herodias, called out to something deep inside Herod. It was at once a mystery to him, and yet a magnet. There was hope. But this was a pretty sick family. Herod threw a birthday party in his own honour – inviting his courtiers, officers and the leaders of Galilee. At formal banquets in that part of the world, men ate in one area and women ate in a completely separate one. That was what civilised people did. That's why the daughter had to go out to speak to her mother. Yet Herod had his daughter in the men's dining room dancing for them. That was not civilized. And then despite his reverence for John, Herod compounded his shameful behaviour by sacrificing John to his twisted sense of personal honour. Herod was a slave to what his cronies thought of him. John's proclamation brought this into the light, and it cost the world his precious life.

29 When [John's] disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb. John's disciples were more courageous than many disciples of Jesus would prove to be. But Mark will leave the story there and in the next sentence, take us straight back into the story of the mission of Jesus disciples. *30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.*

Dreadful things happen in the context of God's mission; bad things happen to very good people. Yet the way Mark has set this out, it's the healing love of God that surrounds this evil and sets the ultimate agenda; not a frightened politician's knee-jerk destruction of truth. Mark's community was not the only one to live in a time when it was all too easy to lose hope. We live in a time of fear and uncertainty now. But this story tells us that those dangers are not our true context.

Instead, we are called by this story to create a context of truth that surrounds the wrong and sets people free; to offer love that heals people, and generosity that meets their needs. We are called to live another agenda; to take up the mission

that Jesus sends us out to accomplish. This story is a call to us to tell and live out good news stories; to surround the suffering with God's love and show them that the context of all that happens really is the love of God. That's why Mark can have us say even this story is part of *the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. Amen