**John loses his head but Herod his soul**  28/1/24dkm

Read: Isaiah 57:11-21, Mark 6:14-29

Text: Mark 6:14-29

Psalms: 130, 128, 119:9-16, 131

When we went to India in 1983 ‘the Jesus film’, produced by Campus Crusade, was being shown all around the world. In South India another more ‘culturally appropriate’ film called ‘Daya Sagar’ or ‘Ocean of Mercy’ was produced, with assistance from Roman Catholics. I saw a Hindi version of this many times. Like most Catholic productions, the crucifixion is highlighted with every blow of the hammer taking an excruciatingly long time. What was interesting about ‘Daya Sagar’ was the seemingly endless dancing of Salome before King Herod. Bollywood is big in India, and the producers probably thought such a scene would attract the people. Both Matthew and Mark record Salome, the daughter of Herodias, dancing before Herod, but it is certainly not the highpoint of their accounts.

Today we are looking at Mark’s account of the beheading of John the Baptist, the longest of the three gospel accounts. Mark begins his gospel with John preaching and baptising in the Jordan River because John heralded the coming of Jesus, and indeed baptised Jesus. John was a prophet who had his own disciples, some of whom followed Jesus from the beginning (John 1:37). John’s desire was that he ‘decrease’ and Jesus get all the attention, which is what we find in this gospel, with no further mention of John until chapter 6. Chapter 6 is a turning point in Mark’s gospel. Jesus has taught and empowered his disciples, and sent them out to preach the gospel, cast out demons and heal the sick. This was all in the region of Galilee, a region over which the Romans had appointed Herod Antipas ruler.

Herod Antipas ruled over the provinces of Galilee and Perea under the auspices of the occupying power from 4BC to 39AD. Many called him king, and Mark gives him this title, but his official title was Herod the tetrarch (Mat 14:1, Luke 9:7). He was the son of Herod the Great who murdered lots of baby boys around Bethlehem in an effort to kill Jesus. Another son ruled in Judea, and a third in the region north east of the Sea of Galilee. A fourth son called Phillip was not a ruler, but was the husband of Herodias who features in this gruesome story.

This passage begins with Herod Antipas hearing of the popularity of Jesus of Nazareth, and like everyone else asking, ‘Who is this man?’ Herod had a special reason to think that he was John the Baptist risen from the dead. Our first subheading is, ‘Abiding guilt’. Having mentioned King Herod, Mark sees the need to inform us of his involvement in John’s murder. Our next two subheadings are, ‘Arrogance of sin’ and, ‘Trapped by sin’.

**1. Abiding guilt**

Herod had a palace at Machaerus by the Dead Sea, in the region of Perea. He is introduced by Mark because everyone, like the people of Nazareth, was hearing about the words and works of Jesus, and asking who he was (6:2, 8:28). Some thought Jesus was Elijah come again, or another prophet, or even the Prophet (6:15, cf. Mal 4:5). There was heightened expectation within the Jewish community of such a person, and even of Messiah. Herod however, was certain that Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead: ‘This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead’ (6:16). There is no record of John performing miracles but he certainly spoke with divine authority, even to King Herod.

Why was Herod so sure that Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead? This is what Mark goes on to explain. He explains why Herod was wracked with guilt; he had no problem killing his own sons but with John it was different. He saw John as a just and holy man (6:20). Herod had no way of dealing with his guilt. He was superstitious rather than God-fearing. People who do not fear God are invariably superstitious; some even think a dead person is speaking to them, or speaking through some other person. For Hindus, that dead person may be reincarnated in their cow or other animal!

**2. Arrogance of sin**

Herod was not always wracked with guilt, at least not the guilt of murdering a man of God. He was from an arrogant and violent family- remember his father killing the boys of Bethlehem. ‘Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely’. These rulers were men filled with pride and driven by lust of every kind. Their family tree was more like a web of intrigue and iniquity that a tree. Herod Antipas was married to the daughter of King Aretas, king of Arabia. Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulas, another son of Herod the Great, so was this Herod’s niece. She was married to Phillip, another son of Herod the Great, so married her uncle. During some family visit no doubt, Antipas and Herodias became lovers. They tore up their marriage certificates and started living together.

King Aretas, the father of Herod’s first wife, made war with Herod and destroyed his army, according to the Jewish historian, Josephus. Phillip, the husband of Herodias was not a ruler, so what could he do? Herodias was probably taking the opportunity to gain more power and riches; not that Antipas can in any way be excused for his response to her advances, if this was the case. He was not the first man, or the last, to fall for a beautiful but seductive woman, and become her subservient husband. The name of Ahab comes to mind! In fact, this story of Herod and Herodias parallels that of Ahab and Jezebel, apart from the initial adultery. Herodias turned out to be as wicked and ruthless as Jezebel.

The lust of the flesh and of the eyes leads to sin, and sin leads to more sin, and in the end destruction. But this way of lust and sin is not inevitable or excusable. You may say, ‘I am just human’ or, ‘everyone is doing it’, but there is another way called the right way. We see this in the young slave called Joseph: ‘How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?’ (Gen 39:9). This is the best way, but there is also the way of David. He was a king who, like Herod, thought he could what he liked with whoever he liked. Better to be a slave than a king, is it not! But David at least repented of his adultery and his murder of Uriah: ‘Against you only have I sinned, and done this evil in your sight’ (Ps 51:4). He confessed his sin and pleaded with God for forgiveness. Herod could have done the same, and known freedom from guilt. But he pressed on in this illicit union with Herodias, the wife of his half-brother and daughter of another half-brother- an incestuous and adulterous relationship (Lev 20:21, Rom 7:2, 3). He ended up being trapped and committing an even more heinous sin.

A person’s conscience can trouble them greatly. Herod had silenced John but not his conscience; it troubled him day after day. Many people are living with a guilty conscience. Every day they feel the guilt of something they have done or said. We hear of people whose guilty conscience gets to them after some years, making them return stolen goods, or go and say sorry to someone. They get peace after doing so. But what about things we cannot put right. Herod could not undo what he had done to John! What was he do? What can we do to get rid of guilt in our hearts? ‘How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit, offered himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God’ (Heb 9:14). We must repent and cry to the Lord for mercy, knowing that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin (1John 1:7).

**3. Trapped in sin**

When John, as a man of God, rebuked Herod for marrying his brother’s wife, Herod, to please his new wife, had John locked up; she wanted him killed. For all his arrogance and violence Herod did act with some restraint in not putting John to death earlier. Herod had probably asked for an audience with this popular prophet, in the same way he later wanted an audience with Jesus (Luke 23:8). He did not see what was coming when John accused him of adultery. But he had a certain fear of John as a just and holy man. Herod knew his sin but did not like being reminded of it. Even after locking him up, it seems Herod listened to John, and did so ‘gladly’, and with a sense of awe and reverence (6:20). He listened to John speak about repentance and forgiveness but his heart was not touched, just his feelings. Kings and politicians sometimes like hearing the truth, maybe because it is unusual in their line of work. Herod was perplexed by John and ‘protected him’, apparently from his new wife (6:19, 20).

‘Then an opportune day’ arrived (6:21). An opportunity for what? Whose opportunity? What ominous words- ‘an opportune day’! The opportunity was to sin even more! The opportunity was for a wicked wife to get her revenge. Herodias had nursed her hatred for John ever since he told Herod he was living in sin because of Herodias. She was looking for an opportunity to take revenge, and that opportunity had come. It was Herod’s birthday, so he threw a party for all his friends, as in ‘high officials’, ‘nobles’, and military chiefs (6:21). Did Herodias help plan this party? Women were not invited of course, unless it was for entertainment. It was not the beautiful wife who was eventually called to dance before the guests but her daughter Salome. Would Herodias have responded as Queen Vashti did- hardly (Esther 1:10-12).

With the men drinking freely, the party reached its peak when Salome entered and danced before these drunken men. The dance was no doubt one of lewdness if not nudity, such that Herod and all his guests were pleased (6:22). Herod was so pleased he proudly offered to give the girl whatever she wanted, ‘up to half my kingdom’ (6:23). This was a proverbial way of saying, ‘whatever you want but with limits’. Herod made this promise with an oath before all his guests. Some make promises which they have no intention of keeping, but some are so arrogant that they make promises with a thoughtless or rash oath. Remember Jephthah the judge and his rash oath, and Solomon’s rash oath concerning his son, which thankfully the people refused to be part of (Judg 11:30, 31, 1Sam 13:39).

Herodias could not have planned on Herod making this promise, but when he did she was ready. It was her ‘lucky day’! When Herod promised her whatever she wanted, Salome went out to consult with her mother (6:24). She was close to her mother, even if not involved in her hatred and revenge towards John until now. Herodias wasted no time in telling her daughter what to ask for from Herod. Did Herod expect her to ask for gold or jewels or a beautiful dress? Imagine his shock, and the stunned silence among his guests, when the girl hurried back demanding the head of John the Baptist on a platter ‘at once’ (6:25). How wicked for this ‘Jezebel’ to get her own daughter to ask for such a gruesome deed to be done. What a terrible scene of sin is played out here, with Herod being pleased with the girls lewd dancing, his wife being pleased with his response, and the girl pleasing her mother. No one stopped to do what was right in the eyes of God? As Scripture says, ‘There is none righteous, no not one’ (Ps 14:3).

Herod was shaken and distressed when he heard what the girl said (6:26). Not for a moment did he think that his promise would lead to this. But it was a promise, a promise under oath which all his guests heard, and no doubt applauded. What would they think of Herod if he broke his oath? He had to choose between losing face with his guests, and an innocent man losing his head. Thinking only of himself, he chose the latter and sent an executioner to his dungeon to bring back the head of John the Baptist on a platter (6:27, 28). Pride and lust are two great and related sins. Herod lusted after his brother’s wife, probably not knowing her wicked heart. Out of pride he kept a rash oath and committed a heinous sin, the sin that wracked him with guilt for the rest of his life. John’s disciples took his dead body and laid him to rest (6:29), but Herod had no rest in his soul (Isa 48:22).

We read that ‘Herod feared John’, not that he feared God (6:20). If we do not fear God we will fear men or women in our lives. Too many men have been led astray by wicked wives; which is why God-fearing men will marry only a God-fearing woman. It is also true of course, that godly women have been a great blessing to their husband, and may this be the case in every marriage ‘in the Lord’.