

Sermon for July 12, 2015

Today's Gospel reading is a gruesome story that turns our stomachs, but unfortunately it could be one ripped from today's newscasts—except that John isn't wearing an orange jumpsuit and his executioner isn't dressed all in black, but the long, sharp sword is the same. It's a reading where our response wants to be a question and not a statement—Praise to you, O Christ? It's a story where we want to yell at Mark—this isn't good publicity for recruiting others to Christianity! But Mark tells it like it is and this is how life is when we question the powers that be. They are afraid of losing their power and they lash out and the truth tellers get hurt—sometimes even killed.

John's story and Jesus' story are very similar; we could even say that John's story foretells what will happen to Jesus. When we last saw John he had been arrested by King Herod for telling the truth about his marriage to his brother Phillip's wife Herodias—that it was wrong since his brother Phillip was still alive. Both John and Jesus are truth tellers and both will be arrested and executed by the powers of this world because of the truths they tell. It is after John's arrest that Jesus begins his ministry, but why does Mark wait so long to tell us what happens to John?

Up to this point Jesus has been teaching and preaching, casting out demons and healing the sick—even raising a young girl from the dead. Last week Jesus has commissioned the twelve and sent them out into the countryside to preach, cast out demons and to heal. Word of Jesus' great power and that of his disciples has spread throughout the nation of Israel and even Herod has heard about it.

But Herod believes this miracle worker to be John the Baptist come back to life and so we are witnesses to John's gruesome murder.

For whatever reason Herod has protected John since he had John arrested; he even goes to listen to him. Herod is drawn to John, but he can't fully come to what John is asking him to do—repent of his sins. The fact that John is still alive just grates on Herodias—she wants him dead in no uncertain terms. At Herod's birthday party we get a glimpse of what power gone bad looks like. There is an abundance of food and wine and any semblance of common sense has left the building.

During the party Herod's daughter dances for him and the guests; her dance is flawless and Herod makes a rash promise to her—she can have anything she wants up to half of his kingdom. Being a young child she runs to her mother Herodias and asks her help. Herodias sees her chance and she tells the girl to ask her father for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Now Herod is beside himself. He genuinely likes John and believes him to be a man of God. One doesn't kill a man of God and not expect retribution for doing it. On the other hand; he's given an oath in front of his guests—important guests who might send word back to the Emperor about him and since Herod is king by the wishes of Rome; he might lose his kingdom. And he really likes being king. The end of the story tells us which part of Herod won out: "Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head of a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother."

So why put the story here? Maybe Mark puts it here as a reality check. Up to this point Jesus' fame as a healer and one who teaches with authority has grown—so much so that even Herod has heard about it. But we're also beginning to see what happens when those who have the power of this world start to fear losing that power. Jesus' home town rejects him. As he sends the disciples out into the countryside he tells them that there will be those who won't believe or listen to them. They're to leave shaking the dust of the town off of their sandals.

Today we hear what happens when those listening believe what's being said about the in breaking of God's kingdom, but they fear losing the power the world has given them. They strike back with what they believe to be their most powerful weapon—death. This is what could very well happen, and I would say almost always happens, to those who speak truth to power. As followers of Jesus Christ we are all called to be truth tellers.

John didn't tell the truth to Herod for glory or to become a martyr; he did it because he was called to tell about the kingdom of God. Jesus didn't tell the truth to be crucified on the cross. He was crucified because he lived his life according to God's kingdom and not the world's and he paid the ultimate price. No one becomes a truth teller because they want to die, but they know that death is a possibility.

Jesus knew it, the disciples knew it, Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew it, but he didn't stay in America, Martin Luther King, Jr. knew it, but he went to Atlanta, and Archbishop Oscar Romero knew it, but he still spoke out against the El Salvadoran government. They all spoke truth to power and realized that it could

get them killed—and it did. But that didn't stop them from telling about God's kingdom—why? Because they knew that the beheading of John isn't the end of the story, that the crucifixion of Jesus isn't the end of the story, that the death of every martyr since then isn't the end of the story.

The story ends with Jesus' resurrection. The story ends with God's kingdom reigning with a new heaven and a new earth. The story ends with God's promise to live among us, to wipe every tear from our eyes, that death will be no more, that mourning and crying and pain will be no more. No, the story ends with the promise that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That's the end of the story.