

Year B Proper 15 The Last Word Mark 6 vv14 to 29

We heard Mark “sandwich” one story within another when we heard the healing of the unnamed hemorrhaging woman sandwiched in between the start and the finish of the story of his healing of Jairus’ daughter. Mark has done this again here: He has sandwiched the story of the beheading of John the Baptist in between the start and the finish of the story of Jesus sending out his disciples to share the good news of God’s kingdom. We know this sandwiching means that the two stories go together, are meant to shed light on each other – the fascinating story of John’s death is not simply to pass the time until the disciples return triumphantly to Jesus. Why does God want us to hear this gruesome story? What does this story tell us about God and God’s kingdom?

Mark chooses to place the beheading of John here. It gives us the heads up that smooth sailing is not in the forecast for Jesus and his followers. This highly politically charged story of John’s controversial death comes immediately after Jesus’ mission has also hit some turbulent seas. The details leading to John’s beheading follow on the heels of a significant rejection of Jesus by his hometown folk in Nazareth. Then, as he instructs his disciples before sending them out, Jesus prepares them to expect that they, too, will experience some rejection.

John had gotten himself into political hot water – arrested by Herod for not keeping quiet about his disapproval of Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife, Herodias. Mark closely links John’s mission with Jesus’ mission when he tells us that Herod believes Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead. John the Baptist – the messenger of God – and Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, would certainly share views in terms of what behaviours would be acceptable or not acceptable in God’s kingdom. John’s arrest and murder, after disturbing the political ‘powers

that be', is a signal to us from Mark that Jesus is heading down that same path. Like John, Jesus is going to be a thorn in the side of Israel's political and religious elite. Jesus has already turned many Pharisees against him by healing on the Sabbath – they're already plotting to take his life and we're just getting started on Mark's Gospel.

Placing the story of John's beheading here, as Jesus and his disciples are expanding their mission to spread the good news of the arrival of God's kingdom, placing the story here is Mark's way of letting us know that Jesus – and his disciples – are in this with their eyes wide open. They know the message they proclaim and the life they are choosing to live is taking them down a dangerous road. The life of complete equality, justice, love, and compassion for everyone that Jesus is proclaiming simply does not mesh with the lives of luxury and power that the wealthy are living at the expense of the "others". Threatening their power, pushing against the status quo, speaking out for God's ways, lands Jesus before Pilate. Like Herod, Pilate is a powerful man who ends up trapped by the power structure he functions within. Herod, the king, puts to death a man he calls righteous and holy, a man he knows speaks the truth. Herod must put John to death to save face, to retain the status and power of his position. Pilate orders the crucifixion of a man he knows is innocent, not deserving death – let alone such a cruel and shameful death. Pilate must crucify Jesus or look weak and disloyal to the emperor.

John's tragic death, which happens because of the way the power of this world works, points us to the tragic death of another innocent man at the hands of the worldly powers. In today's story we see both the way of the world – of empire – and the way of God's kingdom. John – as God's messenger – shows us the steadfastness of God and of life in God's kingdom. He is steadfast to the way of

love, of truth, and of justice – proclaiming God’s truth in the face of great opposition. Like Jesus and his disciples, John proclaimed God’s message to those who did not want to hear it. He cried out for the repentance of people who resisted his call.

Herod shows us the way of empire, reveling in power yet trapped by it at the same time. Herod uses his power to throw a lavish birthday party for himself, propping himself up for all of the courtiers, and officers, and leaders of Galilee to come and express their admiration of him, to be impressed by his wealth and power. Mark masterfully sets us up to instinctively know there is something wrong with the ways of the world Herod represents. We flinch a little when we hear that it is Herod’s daughter who is dancing before him. We flinch again when we realize Herod is exposing his daughter to the less than pristine gazes of a roomful of older men. We flinch yet again when we hear that the men and Herod are immensely pleased by his young daughter’s dancing. Before our very eyes, the wrongness of the world appears to prevail – by the end of the story, John’s head is on a platter.

The story of Herod today is filled with the ugliness of worldly power not only in the shameless behaviour of Herod: “Nothing matters more to him than nursing his own vanity; he will suppress whatever fear of God remains within him, squelch any spiritual curiosity he might experience, and snuff out the life of a prophet—all to protect his own interests” (Matt Skinner, workingpreacher.org). We also see the ugliness of worldly power in his wife Herodias, flaunting Jewish custom by marrying the king while her husband, the king’s brother, is still alive. She jumps at the chance to murder the one proclaiming the wrongness of her behaviour. We even see ugliness in the daughter. She unhesitatingly goes along with her mother’s murderous request and even adds her own flair to it – asking for John’s head on a

platter. It is an ugly story of the corruption of wealthy, powerful people through and through.

We clearly see today that the world's power does not always give way to the life-giving message of God's kingdom. People who hold the power in this world want to hold on to it at all costs. As we have learned before, and will learn again, our God invites us to live in God's kingdom but it is our choice. We have the choice of the world's ways put before us in the person of Herod and we have the choice of God's ways set before us in Jesus and in John. We choose which one to follow.

Our repulsion at this story of Herod and his family makes it seem like this choice is an easy one. But, is it, really? We, too, are attracted by the comfortable feelings of security that worldly wealth and privilege provide us. We like to be admired by others and we like it when people admire our possessions. The problem with this is what we see in Herod. He admires and respects John. He enjoys hearing John's message of the good news of God's kingdom and he believes John to be speaking the truth. But, when faced with the choice, Herod allows the world's ways to win out over God's ways despite the fact that he knows what he is doing is wrong and he is deeply grieved. In that moment, Herod chooses the easier path – the way of the world – and we see where that leads. It leads to death. It leads to injustice in the murder of an innocent man. It leads to inner torment.

We still live in a world in which it feels like worldly power is winning out over the abundantly generous and radically welcoming ways of God's kingdom. There is the abuse of power at every level of society from our playground bullies, to abusive marriages, to conniving world leaders. Anxiety and depression are alarmingly prevalent. Unprecedented consumer debt is matched by unprecedented betting

and gambling – all aimed at achieving what marketing tells us is the good life, the life that will make us happy.

This is the life we are tangled up with, the life we struggle to reject because Jesus shows us the way to the only real “good life” that will make us truly joyful: life in God’s kingdom according to God’s ways. We are called to reveal that way of life, to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom, to all others snared by the world. It is not easy to live a life that goes against the way society thinks and it is not easy to convince others to choose that life – to convince ourselves and others to place God and God’s ways in first place over the money and possessions and ways of being in which we are enmeshed and in which we find security. It is especially difficult when that seems to be the losing side – the world’s ways seem to be winning. But, by placing John’s beheading here, closely connecting it to Jesus’ mission when Jesus’ mission has hit a snag, Mark is pointing us toward the end, toward the big win.

When Jesus was hanging dead on the cross, it looked like defeat. We know that it was actually a victory. The world threw its worst at Jesus and he did not allow himself to become entangled in the ways of worldly power. He loved and he forgave. What feels like a defeat today – John’s head on a platter – actually contains a victory as well. At the end of the story, John’s disciples come to get his body and give him an honorable burial. Why is this a victory? In going before Herod’s people to request John’s body, they are declaring their allegiance to John and to his movement. Their heads could now easily end up on a platter as well. That still happens today. It didn’t come as a surprise to anyone, for example, that Yulia Navalnaya – widow to the imprisoned, mistreated, now dead Russian

opponent to Putin – now has her own order of arrest. John’s disciples refuse to be intimidated by worldly power. They refuse to allow that power the final word.

This story comes after other stories that show us the stunning power of Jesus’ authority over ungodly oppressive forces and his astounding ability to heal. It comes right before we hear stories of the seemingly insurmountable needs of the world demanding freedom and healing from this young prophet and teacher. It shows us Jesus’ undaunted response to rejection. It shows us the willingness to face the perils of proclaiming the good news of God’s arriving kingdom in order to mend the brokenness of the world.

Like John, Jesus pushes against the wrongful ways of the powers of this world and calls us to push with him. “We don’t always have the power to rein in the destructive potential of self-obsessed rulers, toxic values, and an unwillingness to listen to truth. But Herod Antipas and his household remind us that innocent people will suffer when we don’t use the power available to us” (Matt Skinner) and John’s disciples remind us that there is always something we can do to fight the brokenness of this world and help to mend it. Together, we must discern what faithful resistance and courageous hope look like for our part of the body of Christ – Holy Trinity. Together, we must then act on this knowledge with God’s power working in us that can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

In John’s death and in Jesus’ death, the powers of the world seem to prevail. But they do not. God wins. God’s word is the final word.