

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Ordinary 15)
11-07-2021
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

2 Samuel 6:1-5,12b-19 David brings the Ark to Jerusalem

Psalms 24 Everything belongs to God – He is the King of Glory

Ephesians 1:1-14 Spiritual blessings in Christ

Mark 6:14-29 Herod kills John the Baptist

Introduction

This morning our Gospel reading tells the story of the death of John the Baptist. It's interesting how Mark has slipped this story in between Jesus sending out the 12 for ministry, and their subsequent return to be with him. It's also probably a rarity in Mark's gospel as the story is centered around John the Baptist and Not Jesus.

It is a sad story with quite gruesome details. It doesn't really speak to us that much of John's ministry, but rather what happened to him because of it.

For this reason today I'd like to focus on what it might tell us about Jesus, and what lessons we might learn from the actions of the other main player in the Story – King Herod.

Jesus

Let's first look at the portrayal of Jesus in this story. What we see here is that there is a lot of conjecture as to who Jesus is. Some said he was John the Baptist come back to life, others thought he was Elijah, and still others thought he was another prophet, like the ones of long ago.

Throughout out his ministry Jesus made some stupendous claims. He actually claimed to be the Son of God. It's the claims of divinity, that lead to Jesus' arrest and eventual crucifixion.

It's clear from the Gospels that Jesus believed himself to be the Son of God, and yet most of the people around him, even though they had witnessed his miracles, couldn't accept his claim. It's now 2000 years later and whilst many things have changed, many things remain the same.

Many people now would think Jesus was a good bloke and a great moral teacher, but they'd also say let's not get too hung up on this God thing.

I remember as a uni student in Townsville I went down to Brisbane to go to Expo 88. I stayed with a mate from High School who lived in a house with other students. He had on his wall a copy of the famous painting of the last supper. I knew He wasn't a Christian, he didn't believe Jesus to be God or have a personal relationship with Jesus as his Saviour, and yet he thought Jesus could be a good moral teacher. Although we had some interesting discussions, I probably regret a bit not being able to give a better account of my own faith in that situation. As Christians, we are all called to be able to give a courteous and honest account of our faith.

The Jesus I know and worship didn't only work miracles, and give the wonderful teaching of the sermon on the mount. He also said:- I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. He died on the cross, so that our sins and the sins of the whole world might be forgiven. And he rose from the dead to give us Hope for the future.

Jesus is not just a good moral teacher. In all that he said about himself, he didn't leave it open for us to believe, that that was all he thought he was. Jesus is either the Son of God, or he is a fraud. From what's recorded in the Gospels, I don't think there is any option for us to believe anything in between. My money is on Jesus the Son of God, and as a Christian I believe, as God, he is the second person of the Trinity.

Herod

Let's now look at one of the other main characters of our Gospel reading set down for today – Herod.

We normally look to Jesus and the saints for inspiration and guidance for our daily lives, however we have this story from Mark's Gospel and I thought there is certainly something for us to learn from the life of Herod. Herod was what you might call a very, worldly successful guy. Whilst called a king by Mark in this Gospel, he was more correctly a Tetrarch - A sort of Local Governor that the Romans allowed, and liked to have in place in their provinces throughout the Empire.

Many Jews would have seen him as a traitor, because he worked in with the Romans. By doing this it allowed him to hold onto power of sorts, and to lead a very affluent lifestyle.

Despite all Herod's worldly power, John the Baptist was not afraid to confront him about the wrong choices he made.

In the story we hear today, it's actually Herodias, Herod's unlawful wife, who seems to take more exception to their sinfulness being made a public issue, but it is Herod who puts John the Baptist in prison. Here we see an anomaly

in Herod. It appears he knows John the Baptist is right in what he is saying, but he can't bring himself to listen. Herod really sits on the fence here. He doesn't want to amend his ways as John the Baptist is instructing, yet he also seems to be protecting him, albeit in prison.

I can see a parallel here with people who have a relationship with Jesus, and yet fail to make real connections with a faith community. Also, like Herod, I'm sure they know it's the right thing to do, and yet they avoid it. Sadly, it's probably not just the faith community per se that suffers, but rather they themselves. If you're not part of a faith community, it's more difficult to receive the support and encouragement and fellowship that a faith community should bring.

And then we hear about Herod at the party. Until now he had avoided making any real decisions about John the Baptist. Until now he had allowed any action about him to be put on hold as John rotted in prison.

Now Herod is forced to make a decision. Sadly he makes the wrong one. I think deep down Herod probably knew he was making the wrong decision, but I think he'd placed himself in such a bad position that he thought it was easier to do the wrong thing.

Until then Herod had stuck his head in the sand avoiding the issue of John the Baptist. When a choice came to be made, Herod failed because of the way he had decided to live his life and by the people he had surrounded himself with.

What lesson can we take from this story of Herod's failure.

I suppose firstly we should see that we shouldn't stick our heads in the sand when we know things aren't right. But secondly and more importantly, we can see that opportunities come to us through the choices we make. We all have skills, we all have talents and abilities. Herod obviously had some skills and abilities. To be able to negotiate a position of leadership whilst remaining under the power of the Romans, he would have needed to use these.

It's how we use our talents and abilities, and the choices we make that count. We can fall into the same trap as Herod, and be more concerned with worldly issues or how we look in front of others. We can fall into the trap of making choices that might seem easier for us or more in line with what we want to do.

Or we can choose to use our talents and abilities for Good. It might not be easier, it might not be exactly what we want, but if we do this the choices we make should build up the body of Christ and show Jesus for Who he truly is to those around us.

Conclusion

Today we've looked at Jesus and we've looked at Herod.

We've looked at who Jesus is. Not only a teacher or a good man, but the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity.

In one sense this is the hard bit – acknowledging that we are not the most important thing in our own lives, but that God is. In another sense it's the easy bit, because once we decide to follow Jesus, then we're challenged, but we're also guided, to question all our actions in light of our faith and in light of what we believe.

How do you react to Jesus?

As we use our skills and abilities, do the choices we make, work to bring about God's kingdom, here on this earth? Or do we fall into the trap that Herod did, of knowing what is right, but choosing to do what is wrong, because we think it's easier to do?

I pray that as we have listened to the story of Herod's failure, we might be challenged not to make choices we think are easier, but ones we know to be following the will of Jesus, our Saviour and our Redeemer. Amen.