

The beheading of John the Baptist

There's a sorry, sleazy little story if ever there was one.

An insecure king. An alcohol fuelled binge, a young woman – the king's step daughter, no less – doing a sexy dance for the court. A stupidly rash promise blurted out by the king in the heat of the moment, a scheming queen behind the scenes, with her heart full of pride and revenge. The king is too vain, too weak, to admit his mistake, and so the story ends with the head of John the Baptist on a plate – and his disciple come sorrowfully and lay his body in the tomb.

What are we meant to take from all this?

A few things I think.

Number one, perhaps, thank goodness our leaders are not like that. You may not be Keir Starmer's biggest fan. Or you might be quite critical of Rishi Sunak. But whatever you make of them, thank God – literally, thank God – both men, and nearly everybody in our political class on whichever side is a much, much better proposition than Herod, and than many other leaders throughout human history. We are lucky, and we need to remind ourselves of that more often.

Number two, and going in a rather different direction. Yes, our leaders are a lot better than some. However, what this Bible story teaches us is: whoever they are, don't get too enamoured by them. Yes, of course, they're not all like King Herod. But they are, all of them, ordinary people like you and me. They're driven by alcohol and sex and insecurity and ego like we are, and they get trapped in their own folly. Especially in the CoE, which has made such a virtue of being a *state* church – about being on the side of law, order, and establishment – look at that coat of arms over the door – it's worth being reminded that the Bible is decidedly realistic about what powerful people are actually like. They're sinners. All of them.

Secondly ... something perhaps a little harder. John dies as a result of state violence. So do Jesus. So do James, Peter, Paul and several other apostles. So does St. Stephen. In our Old Testament reading this morning, Amos is in prison and being threatened. Are you spotting a pattern yet? The Bible seems to suggest that it is at least *normal* for people who are close to God to be deeply unpopular with the State. Now, I'm not being silly about this. I'm not suggesting that we should all run around getting ourselves arrested on demonstrations or whatever. But we should at least take pause and wonder. Why is it that our faith seems so innocuous, so unlikely to upset anyone?

Is it because our society is actually quite decent, and our rulers not that bad? Actually, in *large* measure, probably yes. We're not in Herod's kingdom and there's no point pretending we are. Yet, equally, it's also true that it's very nice not being in trouble, very comfortable not getting into arguments with people. Maybe it's too comfortable. If there's never *any* friction, never any tension between Christians and the world around them, then either this world has become the Kingdom of God, or Christians have gone spiritually and morally to sleep. No prizes for guessing which is the most likely candidate.

Thirdly, Mark tells us this story as a kind of a sad reflection. Remember Jesus once said that among those born of women, there was no-one greater than John the Baptist. Of all the prophets, he was the greatest. A titanic spiritual figure. And yet, how is he brought down? Ego, alcohol, sex, stupidity. That's what happens to good people, says the Bible – even if they manage not to fall over themselves, which many of them don't, they are caught up in and destroyed by other people's pathetic-ness. The story of John the Baptist is one of a spiritual giant felled by pygmies – just like Jesus was betrayed, it seems, not for any great noble purpose but for thirty pieces of silver.

And Jesus, of course, is why John tells us this story. Remember those closing words: and John's disciples came, took his body, and laid it in a tomb. You cannot hear those words and not instantly think also of the end of the Gospel, when another broken body of a good man is laid by his weeping disciples in a tomb. Mark's inviting us to make the contrast, and to hear the good news: those bodies are coming out of their tombs. The giants will rise again. Folly and tawdriness will not have the last word, the last word will be that Jesus went down into their depths and came back victorious. He does not join the long list of the martyred prophets, crushed under the wheel of history: he breaks the wheel. He changes the end of the story: not sadness, not death, not defeat: but the Kingdom of God. The end not just of John's story, but of ours and of the whole world. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

This is how the good die...

- Anticipation of the Cross.