

Jim White

Church of the Mediator

July 11, 2021

HEROD AND HIS WORLD

Mark 6:14-29

The Death of John the Baptist

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him.

When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his

daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 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 on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

*

ONE WAY TO READ ANY TEXT IS TO ASK what world it creates and invites us to join. Think of a typical detective story; of Romeo and Juliet; of Psalm 23; of Dickens' Christmas Carol; of your own IRS form—what different worlds they create!

Today I want to ask what happens when we ask that question of today's Gospel. What world does it create and what does it mean?

I.

First some background: we need to know that the Herod in this passage, Herod Antipas, is not King Herod the Great who ordered all the male babies of Jerusalem to be killed, but a son of that Herod—one of three, in fact, among whom his kingdom was divided when he died. Our Herod ended up with Galilee.

This Galilean Herod fell in love with his brother's wife Herodias and married her.

John the Baptist, who was active in this world, repeatedly and publicly criticized Herod for marrying his living brother's wife, which was against Jewish law

In response Herod first had John the Baptist imprisoned; then, for reasons and in a way our passage will soon explain, had him killed.

A.

But let's pause at the moment where the passage begins, the moment, after the death of John, when Jesus has just begun his ministry in Galilee, preaching and healing and sending out his disciples to do likewise. He has become known widely known, but not widely understood. People want to know who he is and how to place him in their world, but they have real difficulty doing this. Mark tells us that some say "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead;" others that Jesus is a prophet, like the prophets of old; still others that he is Elijah.

Of particular interest to us, our Herod says, "*John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.*"

Listen to that sentence. What would it be like to say that yourself? We will come back to this.

B

In the stories about Herod and his father we are exposed to a certain kind of world, and to a certain kind of person.

Our Herod is a person with great power, given him by his murderous father. There seems to be not the faintest sense in anyone that this power ought to be exercised for the good of the larger community or to achieve justice in any way. Herod is not a king like the King of England, subject to an elected legislature and part of a larger consensual and constitutional arrangement. He is like a Mob Boss among Mob Bosses, not subject to law or to decency.

He is a thug and the child of a thug. He represents an important part of the world Jesus is entering, which is largely is a world of thugs, right up to the Emperor himself.

The world of thugs is a familiar world to us, at least as seen in our movies and TV shows. We also see it today in countries—fortunately not our own—that are ruled by dictators with total power, without respect for other people or institutions.

Such is the world Jesus is entering, the world Herod seems to exemplify perfectly.

II

But as the story is told, Herod surprisingly becomes a much more complex figure than I have suggested—thanks to John the Baptist, who entered his world and changed it, and changed him.

As I said, Herod had John arrested and put in prison, mainly to please Herodias, who was offended by his criticism of Herod's marriage. She wanted John killed, as a matter of raw power and desire.

But there were limits, self-imposed limits—limits really of character—on what Herod would do or be.

Here is what Mark says about why Herod would not have John killed: “*Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and protected him. When he listened to John he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.*”

We see here that Herod, despite his role in the world, has a very different side, one that could honor John the Baptist and hold him in a kind of awe. More than that, he listened to him with sincerity and puzzlement. Here he is not being a Mob Boss, but pretty much the opposite: a

person engaged with the mind and spirit of a man he can see to be righteous and holy, a true prophet.

I think we are invited here to imagine how the Mob Boss might have been transformed.

If Herod had not been King, or not married to Herodias, it is perfectly possible that he would have been converted by John and baptized. We should not hold it against him that he got no farther than being perplexed. That is an honorable state, which I think most of us have shared at one time or another—maybe all the time. The fact that he is capable of being perplexed is the beginning of a new life, and we should honor it in Herod. actually it holds the promise not only of new life for him but a new world for everyone.

III

But then he gives himself the huge birthday party to which he asks all the leading men of Galilee—people with

prestige and power. As part of the entertainment the daughter of Herodias, his stepdaughter, dances to great applause and acclaim.

A

At this point Herod falls apart: he says to her “ask me for whatever you wish and I will give it. Whatever you ask me I will give you, even half of my kingdom.”

What on earth is he doing here and why? Isn't this just a kind of empty bragging?

I think Herod is so intoxicated, and maybe threatened, by the presence of the all the leading men of Galilee that he just has to show off his power and claim credit for the wonderful entertainment he provided. So he makes this crazy promise to give the dancer anything, absolutely anything, as a reward.

B

Coached by her awful mother, she says, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” We are then told: “The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests he did not want to refuse her.”

That is, he cannot bear the loss of status he thinks it would bring on him if he said “no.” He thinks he would look weak, and could be criticized if he did not keep his promise. So, even though he is “grieved” to do so, we are told, “he sent for John’s head on a platter which he gave to the girl, who gave it to her mother.”

This the ultimate in Mob Boss behavior. He forgets what it was like to listen to John, the “holy and righteous man” who was so perplexing and so important to him. He forgets who he himself has become.

He could have responded with outrage at his stepdaughter’s attempt to abuse this offer. He could have

told her that he was shocked at her request: of course his promise did not include murder or any other shameful act. In that way he could have maintained his own belief that John was holy and righteous and at the same time have demonstrated his power over his scheming wife and her daughter. That would have been the response of a strong and self-respecting leader.

Instead, he reverts to a caricatured version of his role as Mob Boss and orders his servants to behead John, right then. This may seem like a demonstration of power, but it is really a display of utter weakness. What do you suppose the leading men of Galilee would have thought of a person who could not stand up to the murderous demands of his stepdaughter? What do you think they felt about having the head of John the Baptist presented to them? Some party.

Herod has returned to a world of Mob Bosses, the world of power and prestige. In that world he was touched by John, and moved in the direction of decency, thoughtfulness, and kindness—of wholeness of being. But those things are now gone.

II

So what do we have here? A world of Mob Bosses, without ideals for themselves or the world, except the ideal of power. We can find worlds like this today, and they are frightening. In the Gospel there is a sign of hope in Herod's capacity to respect and learn from John the Baptist. But his movement in that direction, towards salvation, was destroyed by his incapacity to stand up for what his inner self was becoming. In world of Mob Bosses this result is awful but not very surprising.

A

What would be needed here to create another narrative, one in which Herod would be able to hold on to what he is learning and becoming? What is this world's crying need? In the story it seems to be John the Baptist. Yes, indeed. But as we have seen, even he is not enough.

What is needed, then? I think Mark's story is meant to tell us that the world of Herod is crying out for Jesus himself—Jesus, who has just begun his ministry.

Of course even Jesus cannot transform every aspect of this world. He cannot bring about a world in which justice is a universal value, a world of mutual respect and love.

But if Jesus himself had been able to confront Herod, even after the murder, there is a chance that Herod could have been redeemed.

He might well have been ready for something new at the hands of Jesus—for a transformation of his soul. He might have succeeded in giving up the role of Mob Boss.

Think of the sentence we heard him utter about Jesus: “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” This complex sentence is at the conscious level an expression of shame and desolation; but at a deeper level, in its talk of resurrection as something real, it is an expression of hope in a world in which there had been none.

Jesus is just beginning to enter this world and to transform it. Last week we were told he was sending out his friends—as he sends every one of us in this room today—to change the world: to oppose the rule of Mob Bosses and to bring into the world a new dispensation, a new way of being, one that is in one sense 2,000 years old, but in another sense

constantly being created and recreated in parishes like this,
by people like us.

We ought not to be contemptuous of Herod—we can all
fail to be the person God wants us to be.. But we should
thank God that we have what Herod did not: Jesus; and the
Gospel; and the church; and each other.

AMEN

