

Sermon: 11 July 2021,

Mark Chapter 6

Amos 7: 7-15; Eph 1:3-14; Mk 6: 14-29

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable unto You O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I don't know about you but the older I get the harder I find it to consider extreme brutality like the story we've just heard. Perhaps it's because the older we get, the more often we have experienced violence in our lives even if it's only in TV shows or on the news. We can't unsee or unhear that violence. That's part of the reason why I don't watch shows like *Game of Thrones*. I want to remind you however, that we don't get to pick and choose between parts of Scripture just because we don't like them; we need to receive the whole Truth ... the nice and the not so. But these few weeks have presented me with an opportunity to take a different tack on this story. So please forgive me if you were expecting something more bloodthirsty.

First of all, look at where the story sits in relation to what's going on beforehand and afterwards. Last week (if we hadn't been celebrating the Patronal Festival of St Thomas) we would have heard about Jesus sending out the twelve in pairs for their first missionary experience. Next week (if we weren't celebrating the Patronal Festival of St Anne) we would hear about them coming back, just before they all go out and feed the 5,000.

Secondly, we might notice a difference in tone between Matthew and Mark's versions of this story, not so much in detail but in context. Matthew says that "*Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people*" (Mt 14:5), but Mark says that it was Herod's wife that had the grudge against John and wanted him dead. Herod "*feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him ... he liked to listen to him*" (Mk 6:19-20). Matthew sees this as a political conflict, about keeping the peace; while Mark sees it as a theological

one, how God makes a difference. Matthew agrees with the Roman historian Josephus ... that Herod was acting to secure order and his future. Mark on the other hand, devotes more time and prominence to this story (15 verses) than he does to either the death of Jesus (6 verses) or His resurrection (8 verses). What's going on?

This is a classic "Markan sandwich." On several occasions in his gospel Mark splits one story into two and places another in between the two parts, bringing special attention to both. Here, the split creates time for Jesus to receive notice of John's death and undertake a deeply personal, unpleasant task without being distracted from His primary task of preparing His disciples for mission. It also provides a very quick return to the main point of the gospel once that's dealt with. Was Jesus one of those who went down with John's disciples to take his cousin's body away and see that the decent thing was done? I well remember seeing my brother's body lying on a hospital bed after he had been beaten to death overnight ... I'd have been there. While this story too, is deeply emotionally disturbing, we are returned to the good news of the gospel in very short order; to the disciples returning from seeing their mission be so successful, and to the true purpose and the glory of God and that's the best part.

For me this is far from being only a gory story. This is Scripture reminding us once more that despite what is going on in our lives, or even to us in the moment ... our battle is already won. Life will take us by surprise from time to time ... often not in a pleasant way. But, once again, our main task is ... *decide now where you stand*. You may very well have a plan and even

have set out on your journey with the best of intentions to live out your calling, but that's not all there is.

There is *a cost to discipleship* and we don't know what it will be when we set out ... except that it will demand *everything*. We are each called to live in the world in pursuit of the purpose and the glory of God at all times and under all conditions ... not just those we choose.

I spoke recently again about the movie *The Potter* and how David Blakeslee placed his stake in the ground when he faced a difficult time in his life. We all face difficult times, and we all get to decide for ourselves where and when that stake gets placed, or not. These things never happen when we are well prepared for them. It will never be easy. So, get ready for it now ... prepare, rehearse, work it out ahead of time to the best extent you can. This is the true cost of discipleship; not necessarily working out what the price will be but decide now what you will pay and what you won't.

Herod failed to do that and *found himself* in an invidious position, no matter whose version you prefer. He made his bed and therefore was left to lie in it ... Herod gave into his fear because he wasn't prepared. By comparison, John had already paid his price ... he had committed himself to Jesus *without knowing* what the outcome would be. All he had left to achieve was to claim his glory.

The OT reading today comes from the prophet Amos, "a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees." When the priest Amaziah accused him of treason, Amos had his story worked out. He had already seen the "plumbline set among God's people Israel" and therefore had confidence that he was fighting the good fight. He could say what needed to be said, knowing *beyond certainty* that he was on solid ground, irrespective of who his accuser was, or what he was saying.

Paul reminds the Christians in Ephesus that God has a plan for "the fullness of time" beyond the limits of their horizon; that they were already "marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit" and that they were therefore destined to "inherit redemption as God's own people" so that they could live to the praise of His glory. We too share in this certainty.

It's at times like this when wee Lachlan is laying in a cot, now at Starship Hospital, fighting RSV with every breath for his right to live, that I remember that I too, have already placed my stake in the ground.

Amen.