



## **John and Herod: Sex, Politics, and Religion**

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Year B, Ordinary 15

Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6: 14-29

14 July 2024

We all have blind spots when it comes to the things we enjoy. For those of us who enjoy music, there is always the song or album which sits to one side of our music collection and is regarded as something of a guilty pleasure. For example, here I have a vinyl copy of the Frankie Goes to Hollywood classic album, *Welcome to the Pleasuredome*. This is something I cringe about, while simultaneously believing that this album is the unrivalled highpoint of 80's pop music. When it comes to entertainment we all have such guilty pleasures.

I have a number of friends who enjoy reading fiction that is generously described as historical romance. It is a guilty pleasure in that historical romance is a genre that relies upon intrigue and scandal. The plot in a good historical romance often intertwines stories of sex, politics and religion. It's that magical combination of all three that sends these books flying up the bestseller lists.

Despite the claim that in polite company it is best to avoid discussing the topics of sex, politics and religion, those three topics command our attention time and time again. They are ever present in television and films, books and news stories. They are there throughout our history, because we tend to have long memories where scandal is concerned. In fact, there is a collection of children's books published under the title *Horrible Histories*, which have enticed children into reading them by promising that these are history lessons with all the nasty bits left in. As president Roosevelt's mischievous daughter once said, "If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody, come and sit next to me."

The fact that the Gospel of Mark records the scandal of the death of John the Baptist is not surprising in one sense. It was clearly a scandal involving sex, politics and religion. And yet, the inclusion of this story seems to be at odds with the rest of the Gospel narrative. I say this, because the Gospel of Mark is primarily concerned with the ministry of Jesus. Yet the passage we heard this morning interrupts that narrative in order to include this salacious story of sex, politics and religion. It's like opening a copy of *Sense and Sensibility* only to discover that you're actually reading *50 Shades of Grey*.

In today's reading we are told that John had offended Herod through being critical of Herod's relationship with his brother's wife. It is implied by the text that John believed that marrying your sibling's wife was prohibited by the laws found in the book of Leviticus, and had been openly critical of Herod for entering into a relationship that he regarded as incestuous. This criticism went far deeper than sexual relationships; it was also a criticism of Herod as a political and religious leader. John's point was that this Herod's choice in this matter was inconsistent with Jewish practice and was unbecoming of a would be monarch. Herod's decision to imprison John was due to the fact that John was undermining his political ambitions.

Despite being a puppet of the Roman Empire, Herod was a Jewish leader who longed for the recognition of his own people. John was a thorn in his side, reminding him that while he longed for the adulation of his own people he would not get it so long as he embraced the lifestyle of the pagan emperors. Herod was caught between two worlds. He wanted to be a voice for his own people and yet the Romans had given him a life of opulence that was highly seductive. For John, such ambivalence showed that Herod was neither a good Jew nor a good King. John wanted his political leader to better, and was prepared to say so.

The story of John and Herod and the party where a drunken promise cost John his life certainly catches our attention. It is a scandalous end to a scandalous conflict. Yet I am left wondering about the purpose of this story within the gospel. Why did the writers of Mark record this story at all?

Perhaps the inclusion of this story is simply a reminder that our spiritual lives are lived out in a wider context. Spirituality is not something that simply belongs within our private lives, but must be engaged with all aspects of life. The hard lesson here, is that the gospel compels us to do the right thing, even when we are powerless to make a difference. John's calling as a prophet compelled him to speak the truth, even when doing so proved to be costly.

To many, John's choice to confront Herod knowing that the outcome was unlikely to be positive, can appear idiotic. There seems to be little sense to such a course of action. Interestingly, the word idiotic has not always meant stupid or foolish. The ancient Athenians used the word idiotis as a description of a person who was indifferent to public affairs. John was the antithesis of such an understanding. His religious beliefs inspired him to care deeply about public affairs.

Perhaps that is why this scandal was included in the Gospels. It is a reminder that following God requires us to care deeply about all areas of life from private to public. God is concerned with injustice and power structures that benefit some while harming many.

We are incredibly fortunate in that we live in a society where we can speak freely, where leaders can be called to account without threat to our personal safety. The true intent of free speech is not to say hateful things without consequence, but rather it is to hold the powerful to account. And yet, even though the political climate in which we live is far less hostile than the climate in which John practiced his ministry, we are often indifferent to public affairs. With each election we have, both general and local, voter turnout drops

every time. While I accept that in a democracy people have the right to choose apathy, as Christians we are called to resist such apathy.

Karl Marx made a famous criticism of religion when he described it as the opium of the people, with the clear suggestion that religion can make us pliable and submissive. There is a degree of truth to that claim. At it's worst religion can lull people into a state of contentment with the status quo, rather than inspiring them to transform the world for the better. As followers of Christ we all too often hold back our opinions out of an overdeveloped phobia of causing offense. By doing so we are betraying the part of our heritage which affirms that a good and healthy society is one that cares for those in need, the broken, the lonely, the homeless, the sick and the refugee. If upholding those values cause offense to the powerful, let's commit ourselves to being more offensive. Amen.