

Behind the scenes at the palace: Mark 6.14-29

Special thanks to Professor Michael Pye (Robin's Dad) for today's TFTD .

The picture shows a model of one of Herod's many palaces, this one clinging to the sheer rock fortress at Masada.



When I hear one of the stories about John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer as he is called in the Gospel of Mark, my main reaction is usually that I feel very sorry for him.

He was a voice calling in the wilderness. And how we need such voices. He did not seek to rule or dominate. He simply called others to renew their lives with him, through baptism. And then what?

King Herod had him put in prison and, as we all know, he reluctantly had John's head cut off to carry out a rash promise to his daughter, who danced very well, but otherwise had no idea what was going on. Her mother was evidently a very nasty piece of work. What awful power structures people get saddled with, hard to shift then, and hard to shift now.

In Mark's gospel narrative the mission of Jesus is developing fast, and John is fading. That's the usual story. And I've heard it from not a few pulpits. But there is something odd about this bit of the story. It tells us that Herod was quite taken by John's teaching

and regarded him as a good and holy man. “He liked to listen to him, although the listening left him greatly perplexed.” (NEB 6,26)

We need to speculate a bit. Was John somehow telling him that things *could* really be different, or even that they were *going* to be different. Is revolution inevitable? Is the kingdom of God going to arrive whether we like it or not? Such perplexing thoughts could be quite worrying for a king who finds himself on a small-time throne, subject to a foreign power, and trying to keep up with his wife’s dubious instructions. Well, a birthday banquet might be a fine distraction, but not with that turn of events, ending with a prophet’s head on a platter.

Why is Mark telling us this? After all, when it was his turn to write a gospel, Matthew cut the story down to size. But both Evangelists end it by saying that when John’s disciples heard what had happened, they came to fetch his body and laid it in a tomb. –And that was it.

Or was it? It seems that John really did have some disciples. Not everybody disappeared after a one-off baptism. Those disciples cherished his memory, did more baptisms, and attracted more disciples. In fact, I have met some of them! They are called Mandeans. It was in the airport at Singapore, where we were all changing planes. They were going to Australia, for refuge. Mandeans are usually written off as “Gnostics” –and that’s a boo-word in the early history of Christianity. Gnostics are said to believe lots of speculative stuff about the cosmos. But I found that Mandeans aren’t really like that. They just explained to me that they practise the baptism of John, regularly, for repentance, while awaiting the kingdom of heaven. In the end we have a shared respect for John the Baptist.

So now here’s my thought for today. John and Jesus both proclaimed the imminent coming of the kingdom of God, and bid people prepare for it. And for that, they were both executed by the powers that be, some like Pilate and Herod showing reluctance, others screaming for it. So, what is the difference? Well, none really.

John’s death, as is that of so many others, is part of the one same complex story. Since then so many people have been imprisoned and even killed, calling for another future in which there will be love and peace throughout the world. John’s death, like that of others, must be included as part of the all-inclusive death of Jesus, that great turning point in “the middle of time”, that is, in the middle of our shared human history, the hinge in our shared hope, when the turning dares to turn, –but for which in Lent we are still in preparation.

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