



# *Seventh Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe*



Sunday 11 July 2021

### READINGS

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

## *Two views - Kingdom of Heaven and a worldly empire*

We have often heard the saying: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” which communicates the opinion that, as a person's power increases, their moral sense diminishes. In our Gospel passage for this Sunday, we meet such a scenario in the Gospel of Mark. Today's text immediately follows on from last week's Gospel reading where Jesus preached in the synagogue and his audience took offense at him. What happens in today's gospel reading shows us the extreme end of such offense at God's word.

In this Gospel passage, Mark outlines two types of worldviews which are at opposite ends and the sad consequences of such. One is the Kingdom of Heaven, espoused by Jesus' teaching, preaching and healing ministry and the other is worldly empire, demonstrated by Herod's rule. In the Biblical story, Jesus has been preaching and teaching and living out a world view that pointed people to the imminent Kingdom of God which was only evident in part but which was still to be realized in its fulness. Jesus, in his ministry, always pointed to how the world would be if people lived out the values of God's kingdom.

However, the worldly empire or kingdom of Herod is different. Herod has a feast. “Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.” What we see at this feast is a show of power. It is a contrasting power to the power of Jesus. It is the power of privilege and military might. It is the power that comes from being a player in the structures of Empire. It is a feast where it seems Herod can do as he pleases, snaps his fingers and a human being loses his life in the midst of merrymaking and celebration.

What is the context?

Herod's wife, Herodias, was married to his brother - Herod had stolen her from him and John the Baptist had condemned this unlawful union, and for that John the Baptist landed in prison. It should be remembered that Herod was a Jew, the empire and the power that came with it, had replaced the Jewish law – the Torah - for him. There was no longer a moral conscience in him about the traditions and spiritual practices of his forebears. Wasn't it enough that John was in prison?

We are told by Mark the Evangelist that Herod liked to listen to John, which was odd indeed for John preached repentance wherever he went.

Could there have been something inside Herod that reminded him of God's word, some glimmer of God that drew him to John's teaching? But he had made a promise to Herodias' daughter that he would give her anything she wanted. "Even half of my kingdom," he said. I bet he never dreamt she would ask for John's head. He was grieved at her request--grieved because he feared the crowd, for they respected John as a prophet. Could it be that he was grieved also because he was still drawn to what John had preached?

Herod could have made a different choice, but the empire that he served had replaced God in his life. Though he loved to listen to John the Baptist, it was only at a surface level - he couldn't risk his own reputation to spare John's life. The empire shaped his values and his decisions from then onwards. Like so many other leaders of business, government and even church, Herod lacks a moral compass and temptation drew him away from God's conviction. John's death is appalling, not so much because of the barbaric way in which he was killed, but because of the circumstances that lead to his death.

He was imprisoned to please the whims of a bitter spouse. This demonstrated the toxic corruption that was rampant at the time – a kind of corruption not unlike our modern day democracies. The story is a wonderful description of the human condition. On the surface, it portrays rejoicing, generosity, the desire to have self-respect, and a determination to honour one's promise on the part of Herod.

Even contrasted with the story of David in the Old Testament reading, where David dances with his companions for God as they led the Ark of the covenant. This demonstrated authentic worship where David as ruler, as king of empire, enabled national celebration in response to God's faithfulness to the people. David's true worship shaped his own personal ethics and the values he brought to the political life of the people he led. But on a deeper level, this biblical story also shows the constant clashes and tensions that our ethics face. And it shows how easily our selfishness can disregard a wider and broader vision of justice, leading to rampant corruption of our standards.

In these biblical stories of David and John the Baptist, we are reminded quickly that not all dancing and merrymaking lead to celebration. Not all celebration leads to liberation. Herod's murder of John the Baptist reveals the underbelly of corruption. But we could look at this story and congratulate ourselves on being better than Herod and that this is an unlikely story to portray our modern day society. However, like Herod, our lives are filled with choices. He chose loyalty to the empire. In the most perverse way, he actually presided over a banquet of death. Jesus called and prepared his disciples to make a choice for the kingdom of heaven: to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, unbind those who were chained by unfair laws and regulations, to rescue the widow and the orphan.

Jesus called his disciples to go beyond themselves and he calls us now – he blessed and multiplied what they had in order to make them worthy servants of the Gospel, however costly that servanthood would be. In case we are tempted to excuse ourselves from this indictment, let us remember as theologian Debbie Thomas says: *We still live in world where the innocent are detained often without trial, imprisoned, tormented, and even killed. We still live in a world of sudden and random violence. We still live in a world where young girls are made to be sexual objects for powerful men through sexual slavery. And we still live in a world where speaking truth to power is a rare and revolutionary act.*

Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ, that in spite of the kingdoms of darkness, God has given us the power to be His children and He has brought to us forgiveness, freedom and fullness of life. Let us continue to share in this life. Amen