

Related topics

For further study:

Prophetic witness; righteousness and justice; public service; the suffering church; the way of the cross

Closing Prayer

God and Father,
in Christ your Son you reveal
the mystery of your will.
Grant courage and patience
to those who are persecuted
because of their witness to your law.
Keep us also faithful
to the Spirit who has sealed us as your own,
that we may live for your praise and glory.
We ask this through Jesus Christ, the Lord.

Celebrating the Christian Year · Proper 10, Year B²

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² *Celebrating the Christian year : prayers and resources for Sundays, holy days and festivals, years A, B and C* / compiled by Alan Griffiths. – 3 vols. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 2004-5.

Proper 10

Sunday between 10 and 16 July inclusive • Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Principal Service readings

Amos 7.7-15

Amos' vision of the plumb-line, and the challenge of Amaziah

Psalms 85.8-13

Prayer for peace and justice

Ephesians 1.3-14

God's plan of salvation

Mark 6.14-29

John is beheaded by Herod

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

John is beheaded by Herod

¹⁴King 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.' ¹⁵But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for 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. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When 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.' ²³And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John

the baptizer.’²⁵Immediately 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.’²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Mark 6.14-29 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

Sandwiched between the sending and the return of the Twelve (6.6b-13 and 6.30-32) is a complex narrative about the death of John the Baptist (6.14-29). It begins with Herod’s curiosity over Jesus (6.14-16) and then leads into a retrospective account of the death of John (6.17-29). It is retrospective since John’s arrest was narrated before Jesus’ initial proclamation (1.14). It is quite a long narrative that has been called a ‘legend’ or a ‘novelistic tale’, that has often been portrayed in art, opera and film.

Mark shows how the fates of John and Jesus are linked (6.14-16). The opinions voiced by John also foreshadow the opinions about Jesus expressed by Peter in his ‘messianic confession’ (8.27-30). Herod Antipas’ guess that John has been ‘raised up’ (6.16) also foreshadows belief in the resurrection of Jesus.

John has denounced Herod’s irregular marriage to Herodias, which violates the commandment against marrying one’s brother’s wife (Leviticus 18.16; 20.21). Herodias is angered by this, while Herod is fascinated by John. There is a large cast of characters: the scorned woman (Herodias), the seductive young dancer (Herodias’ daughter), the important members of Galilean society, the righteous prophet (John), the weak-willed king (Herod), and the ruthlessly efficient executioner.

Herod, attracted by the dancer rashly promises ‘ask me for whatever you wish’ (6.22), which gives Herodias the opportunity to ask for ‘the head

of John the Baptist on a platter’ (6.25). The request is granted immediately, despite Herod’s regret.

The story has an Old Testament feel to it, evoking that in the book of Esther (see 5.6 and 7.2), where ‘up to half my kingdom’ is proposed. The scene at Herod’s banquet evokes that in Daniel 5 at Belshazzar’s feast and the deposing of Queen Vashti in Esther 1. The plot of the wicked queen against the righteous prophet is like Jezebel’s attempt to rid herself of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings.

From Mark’s perspective there is a strong contrast between the upright prophet and the illegal marriage. Herod Antipas shows his weakness in preferring his honour rather than preserving John’s life, a foreshadowing of the behaviour of Pontius Pilate who similarly judges Jesus out of weakness (15.1-15).

Quotations

1

Dear church, John the Baptist died for exposing the sins of others. Jesus died to actually pay for the sins of others.

John was great, but we should not follow his model. Our model is Christ. So let’s stop telling the world how bad their sin is and let’s start sharing how good the Father has always been.

Carlos A. Rodriguez,

2

John (the Baptist) stands as prophets do to this very day, as an unyielding presence unsettling us and leaving us not quite sure of how we feel about him.

... And yet John seems hard to know, hard to like even though we stand back in admiration of him. We react the same way to most absolute figures.

Joy of being human / Eugene Kennedy. 1976

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