

Mark 6:14-29

I am just back from ten weeks in Cambridge and, before you ask, it was wonderful, but I am very glad to be back. In Cambridge you still wear gowns for dinner, the wine cellars are deep and the learning much deeper still; in Cambridge opinion is passionate and informed, you can sit, as I did, between a former Archbishop of Canterbury and a Nobel Prize Winner. And, in Cambridge, conversation is, just now and again, a blood sport. Years ago, when I worked in the University, we had a preacher come to us for evensong. A good man, he tried a just a touch too hard to be relevant; I suppose he did not want to sound too *religious*. He started his sermon, that night, like this:

I sometimes think there is more of truth and beauty in a late Beethoven String Quartet than there is in all the gospels.

At dinner, afterwards, the brilliant and bullish church historian sitting opposite, took a swig of claret, fixed the preacher with a merciless eye and said 'I think..., I think that is the worst sermon I have ever heard in the college chapel.' The preacher wilted.

My wife thinks that is a story that proves how very unpleasant Cambridge can be. She is probably right. Even so, I think it is a story about the gospel. Suppose I have to describe something to you. Suppose I set out to describe Peterhouse, where I was staying, only ten days ago. I could tell you Peterhouse is the oldest college in Cambridge, that it has 260 undergraduates, and that the First Court is Neo Palladian. I could tell you that, or I could tell you what Peterhouse is *like*. I could tell you it is a bit like dining in the Merchant Venturers Hall only with a Latin grace and more references to Aristotle and particle physics. I could tell you the students are a little bit like the older members of our choir only more confident, even more stylish and (interestingly) less diverse. I could tell you that it a bit like a garden party with deep learning and fine wine, laced with a bit of malice. Telling you what something is *like* tells you a lot quickly. The preacher who came to Magdalene relied on that. He told us that the gospel is *not like* a Beethoven String Quartet. That was actually very sensible thing to say. The mistake was to suggest that the Beethoven String Quartet might be *better than* the gospel. The point we need to get hold of this morning is that although we use *this is like that* language a lot, it can get us into trouble. The truth is that the gospel is not like anything else at all.

Now, that nasty little gospel story we have just heard is where we need to start. We are in Galilee where Herod is tetrarch. The gospel calls him a 'king', but that is not quite accurate. The Roman Emperor, Augustus, sensibly, did not trust Herod with kingship so he made him one of a number of rulers in Israel – the tetrarchs - and confusingly they nearly all called themselves 'Herod'. Explaining this next bit is rather like one of those history lessons about the Wars of the Roses where you really feel you need diagrams and something to hold on to, but we do need to try and fix some of it in our heads. The Herod we all know about is Herod the Great, the man who met the Wise Men and who tried to kill the infant Jesus. He was long dead by the time we get to this story about John the Baptist. Herod the Great was power hungry, violent, sexually voracious and almost certainly a psychopath. He murdered his wife, his brother in law and three of his own sons. He ruined his relatives and one book calls the family 'devil's brood'. Despite his best efforts, some of his sons survived him: Archelaus was given Jerusalem. He was so violent and inept that the Romans deposed him and ruled the city themselves – that is why, when Jesus was crucified it was Pontius

Pilate who gave the order. Two other sons prospered: Philip was given territory in what is now Syria and Herod Antipas got Galilee and bits of what is now Jordan.

Now, furrow your brows for a moment, as we do the tricky bit. Herod Antipas, Tetrarch in Galilee, married a foreign princess, but, then fell in love with his own niece, a woman called Herodias. He divorced the princess and set up house with Herodias, even though she was already married to his half-brother (I did tell you it was nasty). Herodias already had a daughter her name was Salome (pretty well all of us have heard of her) and, of course, just to make it really complicated, Salome was married to Philip the Tetrarch in Syria.

This is a story of politics and power; there is sexual longing, violence and dynastic ambition. Sympathy and compassion have run for the hills. Herod Antipas' first wife did not take kindly to the divorce she refused to go quietly, there was a row, and John the Baptist, preaching out at the Jordan, took the story up taunting the adulterers in the royal palace. There is simmering resentment all around. And we still have to add into the mix, the fact that all these Herodians were foreigners. They were late converts to Judaism and the Jews hated them. In place of David and Solomon the Jews had, as the focus of national life, something alien and corrupt. The Herodians pandered to the Romans, they employed fair haired, gentile troops, they kept their distance from Jews, and they lived like Greeks. If you need me to explain what *living like a Greek* means you should to speak to me later, but it would need to be after the nine o'clock watershed.

I am, telling you all this because this is the narrative in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news is worked out within the politics of vice, violence and betrayal. The Tetrarch Archelaus celebrated *his* accession by killing 3,000 people in the Temple... inside the Jewish Temple. Herod Antipas created a new Jewish city and he called it *Tiberias*, that is he named it after the Roman Emperor. What we have here, is a nation at odds with itself and its history. Religion was just as dangerous as everything else. Herod the Great, in a cynical bid for fame had rebuilt the Jewish Temple, and, as a consequence, the devout thought it was tainted. The whole Jewish story had gone wrong, the Jewish kings were neither Jewish nor kings, God's dwelling place, the Temple, was desecrated and the Land that God had given the Jews was run by Romans and their puppets. Small wonder then, that false prophets announced the end of the world, the faithful retreated into ghettos, and the Romans suspected everyone of sedition and tried to kill them. The Jews got very familiar with seeing people on crosses.

When you pick up the gospel think on these things. When you hear talk of kingdoms, when you read about the line of David, when you catch talk of saviours and Messiahs, of foreign landlords, of centurions, the Temple, priests and Pharisees it is all this that lies behind. When the gospel speaks of righteousness, justice and judgement it is against this canvas of corruption and violence and betrayal. The gospel is worked out in a world where power has corrupted us.

Now, the gospel reading began

King Herod heard of it,

What he heard about was the fact that Jesus had just sent the twelve out at the beginning of the great mission. They are sent out just before this story about the death of John the Baptist and they come back just as it ends. The gospel says

They went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them Mark 6:12-13

The gospel is proclaimed to people satiated with stories of adultery and brutality, in a nation that is sick of foreigners and unsure of its identity, to people who do not know which religion to trust. The gospel is preached there in the world where power corrupts, then, and as John the Baptist dies, the gospel frankly does not change things very much.

It is this that we need to understand, this that gives character to our faith. The presiding characteristic of St Mark's gospel is a breathless energy, a great wave of grace that heals and teaches and hopes that sweeps through Galilee and yet it leaves those nearest to it wondering what it really means. This is the gospel where the disciples routinely do not understand. This is the gospel where demons fear Jesus, but followers desert him. This is the gospel where, again and again, there is a sense that the story is not properly told, somehow not easy to get at. In Mark the story is not to be told. Listen to what Mark says:

...his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; Mark 7:35-36

Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Mark 8:29-30

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen Mark 9:9

We keep talking about proclaiming the gospel and then we open Mark's gospel and we stumble; this is the place where the gospel is not proclaimed.

Why? Because in a world where power corrupts it corrupts us all. We all of us get fixated on solutions, on sorting it out, acting decisively., If one more person offers me a leadership course, or asks about my strategy, or my vision for the cathedral, I may weep. Judea was stuffed with leaders and all of them were stuffed with false promise and evil intent.

The gospel is not like that. The gospel is not like anything else. The hope we have before us is fixed on the man who dies rather than abuse power again. We proclaim the Christ who did not compromise, but never, never asserted or imposed. The gospel does not look for the transformation that comes from changing tax credits, or Grexits, or ambition or vision. The gospel looks for the transformation that begins in my heart and mind and in yours and works out from there gently and inexorably. The gospel does not want to change society, or government; it wants to change you and me. It is not like anything else.

Wherever power is concentrated Salome dances still – demanding action, begging favours, seeking privilege and the servants of the gospel will not prosper there. But the gospel looks for a deeper change, for a different commitment, for the responsibilities of love. The gospel is not like anything else. Thank God for that. And it is, by the way, even better than Beethoven.