

7 after Trinity- Proper 10: 15 July 2018

(Amos 7: 7-15; Ephesians 1: 3-14; Mark 6: 14-29)

May I speak in the name of the living God, who is Father,
Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

I love the plays of Oscar Wilde, but one that I do not know is his version of the beheading of John the Baptist, originally written in French as *Salome*, and later translated into an English version, deemed so shocking by the Lord Chamberlain that it was banned on the grounds that it was illegal to depict Biblical characters on the stage! And so it had to be performed in that den of iniquity and irreligion, Paris.

I do, however, know the operatic version by Richard Strauss, and saw a wonderful production of this gruesome opera about 15 years ago with a superb performance by an American soprano who not only sang beautifully, but

performed the dance of the seven veils brilliantly.

Although the story is embellished and made even more horrific by Wilde and Strauss, the horror is here in the original. The idea of a young woman, when offered by her stepfather any present she wishes, 'even half of my kingdom', asks for the head of John the Baptist, is appalling and horrific.

It is as though we have walked onto the stage of a Jacobean revenge tragedy or opened the pages of the Jerusalem version of *The News of the World* AD 30. Where is the good news in this and why does Mark choose to tell us this terrible, tragic and revolting blood curdling story at this point in his Gospel?

The clue lies in the fact that this is the only story of this length in all four gospels that is not immediately focused on Jesus. It is a part of the back-story, intended to

illustrate something about Jesus, but from the wings. This is Mark's understanding of John as the forerunner of Jesus. While Jesus will be judged by Pilate, the Roman master, here it is Herod - the puppet king - who acts as judge, and does so without any attempt at a trial. The Gospels each treat John the Baptist and his connection with Jesus in a different way. While Luke establishes their connection through parallel accounts of their conception and birth, Mark dates the beginning of Jesus's public ministry from the arrest of John and makes John the forerunner of Jesus in his death.

In the stories of both John and Jesus, a weak political leader allows himself to be trapped into condemning an innocent man into a violent and undignified death, in spite of the truth he himself recognises explicitly.

While Herod is described as being 'deeply grieved' at the request for John the Baptist to be beheaded, he does not have the courage to refuse Salome's request, and Mark tells us that he acts 'out of regard for his oaths and for the guests'. Mark certainly gives us a feel for his weakness as a leader. Would any good and strong leader ever use such a lame excuse for such a horrific and unjustified act? In much the same way, at Jesus's trial, Mark describes Pilate as responding lamely to the baying crowd, seeking to crucify him: 'Why, what has he done?', and then feebly accepting their judgement because he is described as 'wishing to satisfy the crowd'. Doing the wrong thing in order to curry favour with others has been a besting sin of leaders and politicians down the ages. Just before the story of John's beheading begins, we are told by Mark: 'The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to

destroy him' (Mark 3:6). So it is clear at this early stage that the plot against Jesus has already begun. And the story of John's death that follows becomes a preview for Mark's audience of what happens to a righteous prophet, a theme which is also heralded in our Old Testament reading from Amos. The link in the early verses of Mark even contains an ironic reference to Jesus's resurrection in suggesting that Herod believes that Jesus is John the Baptist, raised from the dead: 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.' (Mark 3:16) and in the final parallel after the deaths of both John and Jesus, the disciples take their bodies to place them in a tomb.

As one writer puts it:

'Truth-telling becomes a perilous venture in the world of Herods and Pilates. Even when one has friends in high places, there is little security.'

While this is certainly true, it is not the most significant thing about this story. We can, like Wilde, make of it a study in human weakness and political sleaze; we can make history speak and take note of the dangers inherent in the politics of puppet regimes put in place by imperial authorities (recent examples abound). But Mark is not primarily interested in any of these things. His book is Good News, not the News of the World. He does not treat John as a sadly betrayed or tragic figure, but as the heroic vanguard in the glorious battle of the cross which will issue in the victory of the resurrection: the life which we pray is our inheritance as it was John's, through the love, suffering and Easter triumph of Jesus Christ, celebrated, offered and received at the Altar this morning.

Amen