

**1. We talked of prophets last week, and the uncomfortable truth they proclaim. They challenge us to our very core. I mentioned how Jesus, as a prophet, challenges any sense we have of 'assuming things are ours as of right' and un.masks our deep attempts to be self-sufficient.**

Today, we go further in our reflection on the role of the prophet as we encounter this strange, appalling and horrific story of the death of John the Baptist. John was a prophet; he foreshadowed Jesus. In today's narrative of his dreadful death, there is foreshadowing of the fate of Jesus too:

- John and Jesus both ended up making powerful enemies
- A ruler (in John's case, Herod; in Jesus' case, Pilate) admires his prisoner but is too weak to act on his own judgment, swayed by the populist opinion of others
- The ruler goes further and finally orders the death of John/Jesus to satisfy others
- So, both John, and Jesus, we understand are unjustly condemned

The nasty reality we encounter is that being a prophet is dangerous. It's a nasty reality because we are called to follow the way of Jesus. So a part of our calling too is to 'live dangerously.' But what can we take from this brutal account of the death of John? Why does Mark include this relatively long passage in his gospel – the shortest of the gospels – when he doesn't tell us anything about Jesus' birth or much, if anything, of the events post-resurrection?

For me, I think Mark is trying to give us a brief, stark, blunt account of the difference he sees between the way of Jesus and some of the dark ways of the world. He is trying to show us that Jesus – the light – is battling with nothing other than the forces of darkness and evil that roam our world.

**2. And yet again, today, the way Mark positions this narrative gives us this stark contrast.**

Immediately before the reading today, Jesus has just sent out his disciples (two by two) to tell the good news, cast out demons and heal those they meet. Immediately after our reading today, the disciples return from their mission and tell him all they have experienced. Sandwiched within these events of 'light' we have this dark narrative of Herod and his murdering John. Light and darkness. Mark is trying to get us to see this.

But we could go even wider to feel this contrast more deeply. Herod is a ruler, holding at a banquet. His wife and daughter are complicit in the gruesome horror, drawn to his darkness. Just before Jesus sends out his disciples, we have heard of the local synagogue ruler and his daughter, and a woman suffering haemorrhaging for years. Each of these people sought the light. So we have a contrast of the darkness around Herod and the light around Jesus.

Immediately after this story, once the disciples have returned to Jesus after their mission, we read of the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus calls a banquet! But it is a very different banquet to Herod's banquet. Darkness and light! Mark is being quite clear and stark: there is darkness, there is light. Which do you want to follow, he asks?

**3. But Jesus' way, we discover, is a dangerous way. It brings danger to Jesus as he proclaims his message. And it brought danger to John as he foretold the good news of Jesus.**

And so too, we read in our OT passage today, it brought danger to the prophet Amos. Amos was a simple herdsman and farmer, in one of the earlier times of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel being in danger. He might have been a simple herdsman, but he employed great skills of imaginative rhetoric in speaking to his fellow Israelites. He stood up and pronounced God's judgment on the surrounding nations for their idolatry / immorality. For example, he said once (Amos 1.11-12): ***'Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because he pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity; he maintained his anger perpetually, and kept his wrath for ever. So I will send a fire ....'***

So far so good. His fellow Israelites would have loved that message: yes, let's give it to our enemies over the border! But then, having won their attention, he turns on them too (2.6-7): ***'Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals— they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way....'***

In today's passage, Amos paints a picture of a plumb line being held up, as a yardstick of truth. Like all prophets, he uses stark imagery and imaginative, poetic language to bring home his message to the people. His message which will put him in danger, because he speaks against the prevailing moods and movements of his times. Walter Brueggemann, a theologian who is renowned for his writing on the prophets, said this: ***'Imagination is a danger, thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.'***

In the footsteps of Amos, first John, and then more fully Jesus, proclaim a different future to the one that Herod proclaims. Herod exudes wealth, riches, hierarchy as the order of the day. But with that comes his fear, his clinging to power, his desperate need for security.

**4. We might find this story of the death of John very remote from our own circumstance today.**

**What can it say to us?** Well, the more I have reflected on it, I think it can serve as quite a stark parable for us to beware of for our own lives.

Cynthia Bourgeault, the mystic and priest, in her writing on prayer and how we can be changed by the regular practice of the contemplative prayer known as Centring Prayer, talks of the stumbling blocks we come upon as we seek to grow in our prayer life. Centring prayer might look to outsiders as stillness and meditation. I try and practice it, and it has helped me, though I am no expert. You sit for a fixed time (typically 20 minutes) and your sole objective is to 'open yourself up to God's presence.' All those thoughts, worries, joys, frustrations – you let go of them all, as you seek simply to be present to your loving Creator. I have come to view it as 'training' to remind and ground myself in the truth that God is the source of our life – not us. And to be open to letting God change me.

But the trouble is, when you sit in a chair like this, incessant worries keep surfacing (from deeper and deeper down). You remember something you forgot to do. You feel the hurt of some recent event in your life. But it is the fears and worries which – when they surface – can really get you stuck. And it happens to us all – the greatest saints found this in prayer too! Why is this such a universal experience? Cynthia Bourgeault, after working with thousands of people – and I think other great thinkers confirm this – concludes that we all fundamentally share three great concerns. A concern to be loved. A concern to be secure. A concern to be in control. Three poles: the search for affection, the desire for survival, a fight for power. We might all be different in the relative balance of these three poles, but they are there in each of us, she says.

And they are there to the detriment of our spiritual growth. We need to let go of our urgings for affection, security or power if we are to grow as humans. It is a step of faith into the loving arms of God. If you think about it, Herod is all about those three concerns. He wants to be loved by his wife and courtesans. He wants to stay in power. He wants security (so will get rid of anyone who challenges that). But they are only gruesome examples of the human condition in all of us, according to Cynthia Bourgeault and others.

**5. So we should let ourselves feel the full horror as we read these dreadful texts**

But then I think we are called: if we will follow the way of Jesus, we will have to let go of these very urgings in the depths of our own lives too.