

Two Too Many Herods!

[Texts - Mark 6:14-29]

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By the time of Jesus' birth, the 34 year reign of King Herod "the Great" was coming to an end. Herod was proclaimed King of Judea by the Roman Empire, even though the Jewish people didn't accept Rome's right to choose their king. Herod had neither the correct ancestry nor mental stability to claim that position; and throughout his reign, he is plagued with insecurity over the question of the legitimacy of his rule. Though he tries to pass himself off as a devoutly religious man, Herod's actions clearly show otherwise. He marries several times, discarding each wife whenever a more physically desirable, or politically useful woman arrives on the scene. Throughout his reign, Herod has hundreds of people murdered, including two of his own sons. Matthew's Gospel account tells of Herod ordering the slaughter of innocent baby boys, in a futile attempt to destroy the future Messiah. So, in spite of his self-promoting claims about his own tremendousness, Herod "the Great" is actually Herod the Horrible!

Unfortunately, one of Herod's surviving sons and successor, Herod Antipas, continues the moral madness of his demented father. He, too, is an insecure narcissist, constantly worrying about what the people think of him, and the legitimacy of his rule. He is also viewed with contempt by the people of Judea because of his corrupt and cozy relationship with Roman officials. Yet in spite of all this, the religious conservatives of his day still turn a blind eye to Herod's perverse relationship with his brother's wife, Herodias, and with his own stepdaughter/niece, who is traditionally called Salome. Herod is given a free pass, in return for allowing those hypocritical leaders to impose even stricter religious laws upon the people. Fortunately for the people, there arise an impassioned and incorruptible prophet, known as John the Baptist.

Unlike members of the religious establishment, John publically denounces Herod's many misdeeds, including his marriage to his brother's wife; so Herod promptly has John arrested and thrown into prison. Then, at a lavish birthday bash Herod throws for himself, the inebriated King is beguiled by the sensual dancing of his young stepdaughter. He tells her, "Whatever you ask me, I'll give you - up to half of my kingdom!" So the young woman goes to her mother, for some sound maternal advice. Herodias tells her to ask for the severed head of John the Baptist on a platter. The surprised Herod, too afraid to back-down in front of his important guests, reluctantly agrees. So...Herod loses his nerve; John loses his head; the step-daughter loses the opportunity to ask for something actually worthwhile; and Herodias gains her revenge. [So much for those good old-fashioned "Biblical Family Values"!]]

Now although this story sounds like a total tragedy, the reason it is included in the middle of the Gospel

accounts is because it does contain some important and encouraging truths - the first and foremost being that doing the right thing, in spite of the impending consequences, remains the best option for those who seek to serve the Holy One and to improve the human condition. Conventional wisdom may suggest that we be cautious, pragmatic, and look out for ourselves - that we avoid controversy, play it safe, remain calm, and [most importantly] that we don't lose our heads! John the Baptist, on the other hand, remains unwavering in declaring the truth. He certainly knows that openly criticizing an unstable political despot will likely turn out badly for him. Yet he also knows that ignoring the truth and compromising his core beliefs would be even more dangerous, and deadly to his soul. So although John's mortal life may have been ended with his gruesome execution, his life-story and his living impact continues to this very day.

Herod Antipas did have John's head removed, but he could not remove John's lasting impact on his own life. When Herod hears of Jesus' ministry, and the rumors that "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead", Herod is rightly afraid. For in spite of his ending John's life, Herod did not and could not eliminate John's immortal spirit and abiding message of truth. The same thing can be said concerning Jesus of Nazareth, Thomas Becket, Anne Frank, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and anyone today who refuse to abandon their beliefs and are willing to speak the truth to those in power - regardless of the cost.

Like John the Baptist, Jesus will not allow the leaders of the religious establishment to go unchallenged in their blatant hypocrisy. They claim to value human life, yet they debase and dehumanize their Samaritan neighbors because of their differing beliefs and culture. They attack those who they see as being "the other" - the poor and downtrodden, lepers and foreigners, the sick and the "sinners". So Jesus doesn't hold-back in his attack: "Woe to you teachers of the Law! You shut the door to the Divine Realm in people's faces....You lay heavy burdens upon them, but don't lift a finger to help them....You give your tithes, yet you neglect the important matters of the Law - justice, mercy and faithfulness....You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of decaying bones!"

It's certainly safe to say, that Jesus didn't play it safe. *History* shows us that he paid the price for his words of truth, for his extravagant welcome, and for his acts of compassion for all people. *His Story* also shows us that there is far more to Life - and death - than our minds can fully comprehend. The very fact that today you and I remember Jesus, and strive to fulfill his vision of equality and peace, kindness and justice - says a whole lot about what is truly valuable and laudable, enduring and everlasting! Edmond Burke said that "all that is necessary for evil to triumph, is for good men to do nothing." Jesus Christ shows us that in order for good to triumph, it is necessary for good people - like you and me - to stand-up, speak-out, and challenge those who misuse their power and position.