

July 12, 2015

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

"For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to kill him"

The Gospel today is one of only two passages in Mark's Gospel that are not stories about Jesus. What we heard a few minutes ago is a truly sad story from many perspectives.

The Gospel reveals the details of John's death, it also records the death of something else, the death of a conscience.

I would like to provide context, for today's story. The King Herod in today's text is the son of King Herod the Great, the king who had been ruling when Jesus was born. You will recall it was Herod the Great who had ordered the deaths of all the infants in Bethlehem, in an effort to destroy the Lord Jesus.

When Herod the Great died, the Roman emperor divided the Judean kingdom into four parts. One part was given to the man in our text, Herod Antipas. He wasn't really a king; he was actually a "tetrarch", which means "the ruler of a fourth part." He did demand, however, that his subjects call him "king". Herod Antipas ruled from 4 A.D. to 39 A.D. He was then banished to what is now France, by the Roman emperor for demanding to be made a king. Herod Antipas was an irritant to Rome.

Jesus summed up the character of Herod Antipas and as recorded in Luke's Gospel, by calling him a "fox",

What we see in these verses is a picture of how a person can sin against their conscience to the point that they are capable of doing anything, no matter how evil, or no matter the impact on others.

It is possible to ignore the warnings of your heart, your soul and your mind until those warnings cease to be heard. It is possible to so deaden the conscience that it no longer stands as a barrier between the individual and any sin they choose to commit.

That is why some people can do the things they do without remorse or guilt. They have seared their conscience to the point where it feels nothing and no longer warns them about evil.

I searched my heart for a life story where I personally ignored my conscience and gave in to a whim or behavior that was contrary

to what I should have done. Fortunately the story does not end up with this John's head on a platter, but with a spouse less forgiving than my dear Karen, that may well have happened.

Our daughter, Michelle was married twelve years ago and we were honored to have many of our families from Britain and elsewhere travel to the event in La Grange and Oakbrook.

As with all most weddings, the event had been the main subject of conversation and expense in the Dolan household for many months.

The wedding was delightful, everything went off without a hitch, well at least without a major hitch. My friend Nigel was among the guests and I suggested to Nigel that we take off on a road trip once the wedding was over.

Nigel assumed that I had discussed it all with Karen and my other relatives and that everything fitted in well with the visitor's and Karen's plans for the time after the wedding.

I had not done any of those things, I just decided that I deserved a trip away with my pal Nigel. I acted without thinking and without listening to my conscience and matters were made worse by my letting Nigel think that our departure and our trip had been discussed and agreed to with my family.

My conscience didn't even feature in the planning and leaving on our trip. However we could not have traveled more than 20 miles when the realization came over me of my selfish action....my conscience kicked in with a vengeance. Now what was I going to do....I couldn't turn back and disappoint Nigel and in any event the damage was done. Put rather crudely but accurately John's credibility was down the toilet.

There were two sets of events that led up to the murder of John the Baptist, which of course is a preview of the murder of Jesus Christ. Though the Jews didn't actually kill John the Baptist with their own hands, Herod did. And though the Jews didn't actually kill Jesus with their own hands, the Romans did. Still, the Jews stood by while the murders occurred.

The story of the murder of John the Baptist is true drama. It is as dramatic as any story in the New Testament, perhaps only exceeded by the story of the crucifixion of our Lord Himself. It is, at the same time, an unbelievable soap opera of intrigue, iniquity and wickedness.

By the time of today's Gospel, John is already in prison. There is clear indication that it was soon after the temptation and his baptism of Christ that he was arrested. He is then a prisoner and he's been languishing for more than a year in prison.

In last week's Gospel, Jesus empowered his team to cast out demons and to perform other miracles. The power of Jesus' word was growing . Miracles were happening everywhere they went, dead people coming back to life, people with diseases healed, demons being cast out and the gospel being preached. There's never been anything like this explosion of miracles, the explosion of gospel preaching, and it led to an expanded buzz all through Galilee.

The buzz finally reaches Herod. Herod lives in the lap of lust and luxury and laziness. Maybe prior to this he was away, or maybe he was just indifferent because Tiberius was a place Jesus never visited and that's where he lived. Tiberius was a place where the Jews didn't go because it had been built by Herod on top of a cemetery and they thought it was desecrated ground and wouldn't set foot in it. However, Herod now felt threatened, and one way of easing the pressure would be to incarcerate John the Baptist... but how could he do that with a clear conscience, because secretly he feared and probably had some respect for John as a holy man.

John and Nigel were driving south and John had been on the car phone to Karen ten times already. I lied to Karen saying that this was a bad idea, it was all boring and I wish I hadn't agreed to go. Well this didn't work for one second, and fortunately for me Nigel was taking a nap so he didn't hear my negative commentary.

I then changed my tactics; later in the trip I said to Karen that we were coming home early because I was missing her so much. Well I found out later that just made Karen more annoyed because she had planned outings with the family without me and was looking forward to those. There was nothing I could do to save me from my wife's wrath other than asking forgiveness and telling her that I knew I was wrong and acted against my better judgment.

We are still married, but it was only this past week that I confessed to Nigel that I had no prior discussions with my family about the trip....and guess what I think we are still friends.....

Herod Antipas' wife, Herodias had previously been married to Phillip her husband's brother. This was incest under Jewish law and John the Baptist was one ,if not the only prominent figure to publicly criticize this marriage.....and he kept on about it.

Thus began Herodias' hatred for John the Baptist....and she let this hatred consume her. Totally ignoring her conscience and only concerned about her public persona, Herodias looked for the right opportunity to destroy John.

But she was not able to because as I described earlier, Herod feared John and protected him in prison, his conscience telling him that John was a righteous and holy man. The opportunity for Herodias to wreak her revenge on John finally came during Herod's birthday party.

"On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias, rather mysteriously named in Mark's Gospel also as Herodias, but in other Gospels named Salome, when the daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

"The king said to the girl, 'Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you.' And he promised her with an oath, 'Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.'"

"She went out and said to her mother, Herodias 'What shall I ask for?'" "'The head of John the Baptist,' she answered." "At once the girl hurried into the king with the request: 'I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'"

And of course this is exactly what happened. Herod Antipas gave in to his wife and daughter's urges and Deacon John also acted impulsively by not consulting his wife and family.

God gave all of us human beings the gift of conscience....that is the inner sense of what is right or wrong in one's conduct or motives,

impelling one toward right action: Conscience is .the complex of ethical and moral principles that controls or inhibits the actions or thoughts of an individual.an inhibiting sense of what is prudent:

Let us not ignore such a powerful gift and let us all make good decisions..... Amen.

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