

‘Cutting off the head of the prophet’ – A homily for Trinity VI

Mark 6.14–29

We all like a bit of scandal. What is it that sells in today's media world? I can think of three things, and if they're combined then so much the better: royalty, sex and religion. In today's gospel we have all three, and it is indeed news of the most sordid kind. There's nothing private about this story. If it had happened today it would have been all over the papers. The scandalous goings-on at Herod's birthday party, with his step-daughter performing an erotic dance, his rash (and probably drink-fueled) promise, and his command to execute the now famous John the Baptist would even put some of today's celebrity goings-on in the shade!

In so many ways this story feels like it belongs to a world very distant from our own. Few of us would call ourselves celebrities, let alone royalty, and none I'm sure would think of ourselves as a prophet. I can't be completely sure, but I don't think even the lovely people of All Saints would attend such parties as the party we find here, with drunken cavorting and foolish statements made. If we're honest we probably can't understand why John the Baptist makes such a fuss about Herod's choice of wife. And finally the days when a single person carries the authority to end someone else's life in such a flippant manner are long over as far as we are concerned. But is there still something to learn here?

Well at the centre of this narrative is a clash of ideologies. Herod longed to rule over the Jewish people as a true king, and to complete his father's project of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. He was conceited enough to believe he too could stand in the line of someone like Solomon who had built the first Temple almost a thousand years before. John the baptist, though, was embodying a very different kind of 'kingdom.' His uncompromising speech was all about the establishment of true justice and authentic community, where the strong would no longer manipulate and dominate the weak. John's baptism was effectively

upstaging Herod's beloved Temple, heralding a different reality where the forgiveness of sins did not depend on human structures of religious belonging, but instead on the transformation brought about by God's free grace.

Herod's ideology was all about the maintenance of power, John's ideology was the subversion of it. Herod was all about the aggressive seizing of power for himself, while John allowed himself to diminish in order for another to become more important. The shape of Herod's life was about drunken excess, whereas John gave a sober vision of an excessively generous and loving God. The courage of John to speak such a radically different version of reality in such a politically charged situation cannot be overstated. As a prophet he had the vision to see something new, something destabilizing coming into existence. It was precisely the clarity of his vision, and the directness of his speech that made him so dangerous to the royal court. The casual, almost accidental nature of the event gives an extra dimension to the tragedy, showing the fatal vulnerability of this lonely and marginal figure.

So is it only petty, vindictive figures like Herod who cut off the heads of prophets? Is it only those of us who feel their world threatened by an alternative vision of a strange God that calls us to live and act differently? Is it only those of us who long for stability and comfort, who want to shut themselves off from a larger world, a world characterised by the dangerous generosity of God? Or could it be those of us who too quickly believe that we are the real inheritors of John's prophetic spirit, speaking only of justice and community on our terms, tailored to our personal needs and private desires? Could it be that we all have a certain propensity to cut off the head of the prophet, before he or she has a chance to utter words that might make us feel threatened or undermined, or with a promise to recreate our very world?

Rowan Williams writes beautifully about what it means to be a prophet. This is what he says: "*A prophet is meant to be a nuisance, asking such questions precisely when we think we have so ordered our Church, community, society or relationships as not to exclude.*" The

biblical prophet, says the earlier Dr. Williams, can see things that others don't. He or she points to an injustice that the community doesn't recognise, or won't admit to itself. And, as the prophet speaks of a community's blindness, it sees him or her as a heretic and a troublemaker. The prophet is a very risky and dangerous character indeed.

So what does it mean to listen to the prophetic voice? It cannot simply mean being open to every new thing, or every new passing fad, nor can it simply be about 'human rights' per se. Thinking biblically it seems that the prophetic voice is often a voice on the margins, speaking for those who don't normally have a voice. It seems also that the prophetic voice is less concerned with shrill calls to doctrinal purity and more concerned with the call to justice, to a truth that is revealed in the 'rightness' of human relationships, a truth that is found as we travel to those who are normally outside our sphere of concern, and see in them the face of Christ. It seems that the prophetic voice is not one unconcerned with tradition, but is rather a voice that speaks new things out of that tradition. It is a voice that rather than imagining itself as the guardian of truth, understands that truth challenges us from a place beyond ourselves and asks us to travel there together. It is a voice that recognizes that 'orthodoxy' is not about 'who is in' or 'who is out,' but instead articulates the reality of a God who is abundant in love and fiery in passion. Can we hear the prophetic voice today in words of compassion and welcome for refugees and asylum seekers or in calls for inclusivity for our LGBTQI+ brothers and sisters? I wonder.

It seems to me that 'cutting off the head of the prophet' is about silencing voices that threaten our control over our world, about not being willing to face up to the possibility that there might be other ways of articulating truth. Listening to the prophetic voice is not about looking to any one constituency as having the 'right way' of doing things. It is, instead, about realizing that truth is ahead of all of us, calling us into a new as-of-yet undisclosed world that needs more than just my voice to speak it into existence. Finally it is about recognizing that the mystery of God is dynamic enough to explode open all of our ways of speaking, acting and doing.