

**The Kingdom And The Cross:  
A Clash Of Kingdoms  
Mark 6: 14-29  
March 3, 2024**

Let's begin with some background information in how the New Testament is put together, because if you are not overly familiar with the Bible, it can be a little confusing. The New Testament begins with four books that we call gospels. In order, they are the Gospel According to Matthew, the Gospel According to Mark, the Gospel According to Luke, and the Gospel According to John. Each of these four books tell the same story – the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – but they each do it slightly differently. There are many episodes that are common to all four, and then there are some episodes that only appear in one, or two, or three of the four. Sometimes those episodes are arranged in a different order, with different details emphasized and others omitted. That's because each book was written for a different original audience, and each author has his own unique sources and style. The result is that we have four separate and reliable accounts of the same historical event.

For now, we are journeying through Mark's account. One of the things that makes Mark unique is his brevity. His book is the shortest of the four by a considerable margin. Mark omits many of

the episodes that are found in the other gospels. And, the episodes he does include are reported with much less detail. Today's reading is the one exception to that pattern. Mark tells us about the death of John the Baptist with more painful detail than anybody else. We get a condensed version in Matthew. Luke mentions it only in passing. And John doesn't even refer to it. Meanwhile, Mark slows down his normally rushed pace to give us a blow-by-blow report. The scandalous marriage between Herod and his sister-in-law. The seething anger of Herodias. The lavish party. The manipulated behavior of the daughter. The lack of conviction in Herod in the face of his crowd. The gruesome beheading of John. The tender concern of John's disciples for the body of their slain teacher. With all that unusual detail, it's as though Mark is holding up a sign that reads, "Slow down. Pay attention. This is really important!"

Why would Mark give so much emphasis to such a painful story? To begin answering that question, it is helpful to think about the historical circumstances under which Mark wrote his gospel account. Our best scholarship tells us that Mark probably wrote his gospel sometime in the mid 60's of the first century – sometime around 64 AD. That's roughly 30 years after the events he is reporting. As an aside, that is easily within the same generation of

those who knew Jesus personally. This means that Mark very likely got his information from people who witnessed these events first-hand. In fact, there a strong tradition dating back to the first and second century that Mark's primary source was the Apostle Peter.

Why this brief history lesson? It's because the mid 60's AD was a terrible time of persecution for the earliest believers. The Roman Emperor Nero had unleashed a wave of violence against the young church. The Roman historian Tacitus tells us about some of the horrific things Nero did to Christians in and around Rome. He made a sport of finding some of the most creatively excruciating ways you can think of to put them to death, forcing believers to flee and go into hiding. That means that the original audience who read Mark's gospel for the first time was experiencing in real time the same kind of horror that was visited upon John the Baptist.

Mark knew this, so his choosing to write about John's martyrdom was a way of communicating hope to his fellow believers. It was a way of saying, in effect, "You are not alone. Others have gone through this before. The suffering you are experiencing does not mean God has abandoned you. This is the

way the world treats God’s faithful. So, stand strong and be of good courage.”

There are those who would have us to think that having faith in Jesus should act as immunity against the hardships of life. If you just believe strong enough, God will make you healthy, wealthy, and happy. But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Mark wrote to tell us this is not necessarily always the case. Sometimes – not always – but sometimes, the choice to follow Jesus will lead us into struggles, not away from them. It certainly did for John the Baptist, and for Mark’s first readers. It will for us as well. Most of us will never be called upon to physically lay down our lives in the name of our faith, but even still, if we follow Jesus, he may well lead us into problems we would not have if we never followed Jesus, because he is going to ask us to respond to a different calling and to answer to a different authority than the world around us. And that will almost certainly set up a conflict.

The story Mark tells in this reading illustrates that conflict perfectly. What we see happening in this true story is a clash between two different kingdoms, each with a very different way of operating. On the one hand, there is the kingdom of this world, which in this story is represented by Herod, and all those attached

to him. Based on the details Mark gives us, we can identify at least three characteristics of this kingdom.

The first is a lust for power. The Herod dynasty was obsessed with power. The Herod family was appointed by Rome to oversee the region of Israel in the time before, during, and after Jesus. They were partially Jewish, so they gave some deference to Jewish traditions, but their primary loyalty was to whoever could give them power – in this case, Rome. And they guarded that power brutally.

There are actually five different Herod's mentioned in Scripture. The first was Herod the Great. He was the one who, when he found out about the birth of Jesus, ordered the slaughter of all the baby boys 2 years old and younger in and around Bethlehem. Rome had given him the official title of “King of the Jews,” so when the wise men showed up in Matthew 2 asking about the one who had been born king of the Jews, Herod acted to eliminate the threat. If innocent children had to die to protect his power, so be it.

The Herod mentioned in today's reading was Herod Antipas, one of the surviving sons of Herod the Great. I say “surviving” because the first Herod had executed at least three of his own sons when he became suspicious they were challenging his

power. As today's reading shows, Herod Antipas was no less of a power grabber. As far as he was concerned, he could have whatever he wanted, even if that meant stealing his brother's wife. The kingdom of this world is built on a lust for power.

The second characteristic is a lust for pleasure. It is no accident that this story happens during what was almost certainly a drunken, self-indulgent, hedonistic party. This kind of party wasn't meant to nurture the community bonds between people or to share generosity with others or to celebrate God's goodness. This was a party designed to feed people's lust for pleasure, mostly as a way of affirming Herod's lust for power. While the text doesn't say it directly, it is at least implied that when Herod's step-daughter performed, she wasn't demonstrating a graceful display of classical dance forms. Based on what we know about the culture of Herod's palace, it was most likely lewd and revealing.

That sets up a third characteristic of the world's kingdom: pride. Herod's lust for power and the guests' pursuit of pleasure set up the perfectly dangerous condition for Herod to display his pride. He wanted to impress his guests by promising his step-daughter whatever she wanted as a reward. When she was manipulated by her mother into asking for John the Baptist's head on a platter, Herod was stuck between a rock and a hard place. He didn't want

to execute John. He had a strange regard for John, so much so that he had protected him from harm up until this point. But once his ego was on display, he couldn't back down. To not grant this request would be to admit weakness or a lack of resolve, and that his something his pride could never allow. Herod had painted himself into a corner, so he had John the Baptist beheaded for the simple sake of preserving his pride.

Herod may seem like an extreme case, but his actions in this story are a perfect illustration of how the kingdom of this world operates. It is a kingdom bent on satisfying itself for its own purposes, which are not aligned with God's purposes. Later in the New Testament, 1 John 2:15-17 reads, "*Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world.*"

Meanwhile, this story also points us to the other kingdom, which the Bible calls the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the central image and the central theme of Jesus' teaching and preaching. Back in Mark 1:15, the first recorded words of Jesus declare, "*The time has come... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!*" As those words make clear,

the kingdom of God is not simply that place we go when we die. With the coming of Jesus into the world, the kingdom of God is present among us here and now. That kingdom is represented in today's story by John the Baptist. Jesus was the bringer of the kingdom, but John was a witness to it. His actions model what life looks like for those who choose to live in that kingdom here and now.

We can offer a counterpoint to each of the three characteristics already mentioned. First, while the kingdom of the world pursues a lust for power, the kingdom of God is built on the desire for faithfulness. This doesn't mean Christians can never be in places of power and influence. It does mean that Christians do not chase after power its own sake. The goal of those who live in the kingdom of God is to be faithful, whether it leads to the desired outcome or not.

That's what John did. I don't think John had any illusions that his words or actions would change anything regarding Herod's immoral union to Herodias. He didn't have the power to make that happen. Nor was he naïve to the kind of trouble he would create for himself by speaking out. His goal was not to create a desired outcome. His goal simply to be a faithful witness to the truth.



Second, while the kingdom of the world pursues a lust for pleasure, the kingdom of God is built on a pursuit of holiness. This doesn't mean there is anything wrong with parties or celebrations or having a good time. Far from it. In fact, there are long descriptions in the Old Testament of all the festivals that God commanded – not suggested, but commanded – the Jewish people to keep. And it is no coincidence that in John's gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry at a wedding party, which in that day and time could last up to a week. The ancient Jews could dance circles around us when it came to throwing a party.

But the Christian is not to be driven primarily by the pursuit of pleasure. We are called to pursue holiness. Holiness is best understood as the act of being set apart, being distinct, being different. We don't pursue holiness because we think we are better than others, but because we have responded to a different call and answer to a different authority. Holiness is a pattern of life and behavior that is distinct from the world.

John was certainly that. We know from other places in Scripture that he rejected the world's comforts and pleasures. He lived a life of simplicity and discipline. That doesn't mean God is calling us to sell our homes, move to the desert, and eat locusts and wild honey for the rest of our lives. It does mean that God is

calling to be set apart. Materially. Financially. Sexually.

Relationally. Emotionally. Spiritually. Life in the kingdom of God ought to be set apart and different. Otherwise, we are still living in the kingdom of the world.

Finally, while the kingdom of the world pursues pride, the kingdom of God is built on humility. To be humble doesn't mean to hate ourselves, or beat ourselves up. To be humble means to view ourselves honestly and accurately. It means to recognize that God is God, and we are not. He is the creator; we are the creatures. Our calling is to yield to his purposes and his sovereignty.

John the Baptist readily did this. In John 3:30, speaking of Jesus, John says, "*He must become greater; I must become less.*" He knew his job was NOT to build a fan base for himself or establish a cult of personality around his charisma. His job, his only job, was to point people beyond himself to Jesus. There is no higher calling or purpose for those who live in the kingdom of God. As a friend once put it, our job is to promote God's reputation everywhere we go.

Power, pleasure, pride. This is the way of the world. Meanwhile, the kingdom of God is driven by faithfulness, holiness, and humility. Unfortunatley, as John's story reminds us, choosing to live in the kingdom will, sooner or later, put us at odds with the

world. Ask the man who gets passed over for the promotion because he refuses to endorse corrupt business practices. Ask the student who gets rejected by her so-called friends because she won't ride the gossip train or do the other things the crowd is doing. Ask the family who can't afford certain things because they choose to be faithful stewards and generous givers. We may not get our heads cut off, but we all will be asked to give up something. Ultimately, we will be asked to die to ourselves.

The good news is we are the not the first, and we are not alone. The death of John foreshadows the death of Jesus. He will pay the full price for his faithfulness and his holiness and his humility, so we are not asked to do anything he has not already done. Even more importantly, he has been raised from the dead, and he has promised to do the same for all those who live in his kingdom. And while the kingdom of this world will pass away, his kingdom is forever.