

PROPER 10 B

Mark 6:14-29

This Man is Disarmed and Dangerous

There he is. In the temple again. Causing trouble.

Speaking very differently from other preachers.

Speaking with authority about sorrow, anxiety, sickness, and death.

Penetrating the dark corners of human existence. Shattering illusion.

Make no mistake about it; this is a dangerous man.

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known.

Some were saying, "***John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason, these powers are at work in him.***"

But others said, "***It is Elijah.***" And others said, "***It is a prophet.***"

But when Herod heard of it, he said,

"John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

In the early 1920s, Gandhi and India's National Congress Party

began moving more and more towards civil disobedience

as a chief political strategy in order to achieve independence

from British colonial rule.

In spite of violent setbacks to the cause

and regular clashes with British authorities,

which frequently landed him in jail, the founder of modern India
never gave up his vision that the British could be driven from India
without shedding one drop of British blood;
and he continued to walk his way back and forth
across the country preaching the gospel of non-violent resistance.

As he did so, his reputation began to spread
throughout the Indian subcontinent such that
both Hindu and Muslim villagers
would come from long distances on foot,
with their bedding on their heads and shoulders,
on bullock carts, and on horseback, just to catch a glimpse of him.

Never before, it seemed, had any political or perhaps religious leader,
in his own lifetime stirred the masses
to their very depths throughout the country
and received the homage of so many people.

Even the civil authorities had to sit up and take notice.

Although they resented deeply what Gandhi was attempting to do,
they could also not help but admire what he had come to represent.

Eventually, the skeptical British Governor of Madras,
who lost no love on Gandhi, was forced to declare

that British Home Rule was now dealing with
an entirely new political phenomenon.

Gandhi is here with the whole of his gang.

It is amazing what an influence this man was getting.

There is no doubt that Gandhi got a tremendous hold
on the public imagination.

Because that is the kind of threat that the rulers of this world fear most.

The Gospel writer Mark plunks us down squarely
in the world of Real Politick in this week's gospel.

It is the only story in the Gospel of any length that is not about Jesus;
and it is no accident that Mark places it where he does.

Jesus has just finished giving instructions to his disciples
about how they are to embody God's love in the world.

Expect opposition and trouble, he tells them,

but the only thing you need to take with you

is the gospel and a confident faith.

And then, Mark, as if to "**slam dunk**" his point

reminds us of the story of John the Baptist;

and he does it in a very deliberate way.

In the first place he does it by reminding him of the fear of King Herod.

Now, you may remember that this is not Herod the Great,
who ruled Israel around the time of Jesus' birth.

This is Herod the Great's son by his Samaritan wife Malthace.

He was called Herod Antipas to keep them straight
and he was a chip off the old block.

Mark calls him "**King Herod**",

but the truth is he had only pretensions to be a king.

He was the ruler of Galilee from about 4 B.C. to 39 C.E.,

making him the chief political authority,

aside from the Romans, during the time of Jesus.

His official position was really tetrarch of Galilee and Perea,

a position made available to him

as a result of his father's accommodation with the Romans.

He never did get to be king of anything,

although it was precisely this request to be called "**King**"

by Rome and everyone else,

...the request for this title, that eventually got him sent into exile in 39 C.E.

by a paranoid emperor Caligula.

He was an ambitious, half-Jew,

who, although he enjoyed great power and wealth,
was despised both by his Roman masters and his Jewish subjects.
He was the kind of ruler who thumbed his nose at Israel's religious laws,
both by marrying his brother's wife Herodias
and by building his capital city, Tiberius, on top of a pagan cemetery.

The story that the gospels, as well as the Roman historian Josephus, tells
is that he is the Herod who got into deep political controversy
with John the Baptist. John was mad at Herod for several reasons;
but the one that really stuck in John's craw
was Herod's marriage to Herodias.

John publicly accused this famous couple of *"living in sin"*
and that was enough to turn Herodias practically purple with rage.
Demonstrating that she was the one who wore the pants in the family,
Herodias convinced Herod Antipas into throwing John in jail
until she could figure out what to do with him.

Well, apparently Herod feared John almost as much as he feared his wife.
He knew how popular John was with the people
and how dangerous it could be politically
if there was ever an uprising over whatever he decided to do to John.

At least in prison he could keep an eye on him, thought Herod,
as well as keep peace in his own bedroom.

But it wasn't just fear that motivated Herod.

He was fascinated by John and couldn't help
sneaking out of the bedroom at night
and wandering down to the basement
just so that he could hear John ranting in his old, dark prison cell.

The portrait Mark paints is of a man who is transfixed with
the very thing he fears and despises.

"When he heard him," Mark says, ...

he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him."

Unfortunately this fascination was not enough

to convince him to change his life;

and the day Herod decided to throw a birthday party for himself

to end all birthday bashes,

he unwittingly set in motion

forces the consequences of which he could never have foreseen,

unless, of course, he had learned a few things

from living with a schemer like Herodias.

Apparently, it was a banquet done in a fashion bound to impress

all of Herod's political cronies and enemies

and to offend the religiously scrupulous.

The climax was when Herodias' daughter Salome,

who was actually Herod's niece, danced an apparently lascivious dance

that was meant to arouse Herod

and make him vulnerable to suggestion.

Whether the sexy Salome meant anything by it \

other than strutting her stuff,

her mother saw it as the chance she had been waiting for.

Caught up in the moment like a dirty-old man and macho ruler,

Herod gave in to both his lust and his pride

by following through on an oath to Salome

to give her anything she wanted.

Herodias made sure that it was John's head on a platter

that "***she wanted***"; and that, as they say,

was the end of John the Baptist.

Or so everyone thought. By the time Mark tells us this story,

John has been dead for some time

and Jesus has been actively preaching

his own message throughout Galilee.

Although Herod apparently didn't know Jesus,
he knew that something equally as powerful as John
was stirring out there among the people.

...when Herod heard of it, he said,

"John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

This is what Mark wants to tell us.

This is not just a story to remind us of the dangers of preaching the truth,
although that is certainly true.

It is a story to remind us of the delusions of the powerful.

Herod's own actions have engendered in him
a deep-seated fear about the results of his deed.

He interprets what he hears about Jesus **"and his gang"**

by imagining John having come back to get him.

Nor is this merely a story to tip us off
about what is likely to befall Jesus in the end too.

Of course, a similar fate is going to befall Jesus,
as it befalls anybody with the courage to speak truth to the powerful.

But that is not something Mark's church would ever have questioned.

What they would have had doubts about
was the effectiveness of such truth-telling.

Would following Jesus and speaking the truth to loveless power
ever make any difference in the end?

Mark says that even defenseless, unarmed, decapitated, dead men,
like John the Baptist, come back to haunt the powerful of this world.

Let me tell you...They do! Amen.