

It isn't going to end well (Mark 6: 6-29)

The Mission of the Twelve

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

The Death of John the Baptist

14 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.' ¹⁵But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' ²³And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' ²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

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It's a long one this week, but bear with it: this is a key point in Mark's narrative. It's the place where he begins to prepare us for the Way of the Cross; he does this by connecting the mission of The Twelve with the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod Antipas. It's the prequel to Peter's confession in Caesarea Philippi (chapter 8) and the Transfiguration (chapter 9). It's all about Mark's vision of what being church entails.

The mission of the Twelve

The resistance at Nazareth means that Jesus has to regroup and rethink his strategy. His response is to gather the fledgling messianic community even more closely around him.

This is the second stage of Jesus' call. Jesus appoints The Twelve in 3:14, "to be with him, to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons". To date (the first stage), the disciples have been with Jesus and learned from him. Now, in 6:7, he sends them out to proclaim the message, cast out demons and heal the sick. The third stage will be a result of the increasing opposition: the call to take up the cross.

It is interesting to note that Jesus "gives his disciples authority over the unclean spirits" and appears to have taught them how to cure the sick. Modern western culture has had little truck with the miraculous, regarding it as primitive superstition. One feature of postmodernity has been a revival of interest in the miraculous and a willingness to take these things with far more seriousness. We are a far more spiritual generation than our immediate forebears, far more aware of the interconnectedness of health and spiritual life. This manifests in a renewed emphasis on holistic approaches to health, both in alternative therapies and in conventional medicine. Similarly, there has been a quiet but important renewal of interest in the ancient ministry of exorcism, as well as willingness among biblical scholars to take the miraculous in Jesus' ministry with far more seriousness, rather than dismiss it as myth. I note this because it seems to me that we ought to be open to exploring these ministries as a regular part of church life.

Repentance, grace and the new world

The apostles (as they now are) proclaim “that all should repent”. In doing so, they echo Mark’s summary statement of Jesus in 1:14: “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent, and believe in the Good News!” Repentance is the proper response to the gospel of the kingdom, and is clearly what the people of Nazareth fail to do. But what does “repent” mean? At the outset of the story, the Baptist calls on people to repent and be baptised. This is the classic prophetic call to repentance: “Mend your ways! Turn or burn!” In a covenantal framework, it effectively means “Get back into line!”

Jesus’ call is different: “Repent and believe in the Good News!” The Good News is the drawing near of the Kingdom of God in Jesus. Yet the Kingdom comes not as judgement so much as promise: “Here is the possibility of a new world! Repent – leave behind the old ways and ties; the old shackles that bind you to death and despair. Become part of the new world!” It’s a call not to grovel but to reach out and embrace God’s gift – a gift which is entirely gracious. It’s not about “getting back into line” but rather a call to become something new. It’s a summons to God’s new future, rather than a recall to a more blameless past. Its sign isn’t baptism, but healing and liberation.

I find this a welcome and challenging emphasis in light of so much “worthless worm” theology that churches excel in. Jesus’ call is life-giving and freeing, while so much Christian preaching seems to bind people in shackles of guilt and unworthiness – particularly in my own Reformed tradition. That, at least, is the popular perception, and if it’s wrong, it’s because we haven’t communicated the Good News! Here is a message of repentance that is positive. It necessarily means changing and leaving old ways behind – but for positive reasons, rather than beating people over the head with how bad they are. We seem far more scared of being seen to be “soft on sin” than “strong on Life”! Jesus was astoundingly different – and wise!

It isn’t going to end well!

“It started out so nice” is the title of a song by Sixto Rodriguez, which I first heard as a teenager and have never forgotten. What struck me listening to it was a Dylanesque sarcasm and irony about a relationship that had begun so well and had then gone so horribly wrong. That is the dynamic in the next section of our gospel passage for today: the death of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea.

All four gospel writers highlight the connections between Jesus and John the Baptist – both the similarities and the differences – in their opening scenes. All four portray Jesus’ ministry and mission beginning with his baptism by John in the Jordan.

Matthew is uneasy enough about the possible implications of Jesus submitting to John’s baptism that he has John ask Jesus, “Why do you come to be baptised by me? I need to be baptised by you instead!” (Matthew 3:14). On the other hand, he has the Baptist echo Jesus’ own preaching: “Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near!” (Matthew 3:2/Mark 1:15). Luke tells us they were cousins, but contrasts their preaching in terms of grace vs judgement. John has the Baptist say explicitly, “I am not the Messiah!” (John 1:20), point to Jesus and announce, “Behold the Lamb of God!” (John 1:36), at which two of his own disciples leave him and follow Jesus (John 1:37).

While all four evangelists want to make it absolutely clear that Jesus is far greater than John (John is a prophet of God; Jesus is the Son of God), they are also at pains to emphasise their shared role in God’s eschatological purposes. They all tell us, in different ways, that what is going down in the Jordan valley and in the Galilee (and of course, ultimately in Jerusalem) is nothing less than God’s final salvation for the world. That is why both John and Jesus meet similar fates – which is the point Mark is making here.

Mark’s story in chapter 6 intentionally weaves together the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (the fate of a prophet v4), mission of The Twelve and the death of John the Baptist as a narrative signal of how Jesus’ story is going to end. He is flagging it now; he will take it up again and make it absolutely clear in chapters 8 and 9: this is the

Way of the Cross. And his point in moving suddenly from the mission of The Twelve to the death of the Baptist is that the church, as inheritors of Jesus' Good News of the New World Order of the Kingdom and the call to repent and believe will almost invariably meet the same fate (hence the call to take up the cross and follow in order to be Jesus' disciples in 8:34-5).

The gospel as political confrontation

We need therefore to read the death of the Baptist in the light of what Mark is telling us about the mission of the church that preaches Jesus' gospel.

Fast-forward to chapters 8 and 9 (Caesarea Philippi and the Transfiguration) for a moment. In chapter 9, Mark makes absolutely explicit what he has hinted at in his opening narrative: the Baptist is the eschatological Elijah, forerunner of the Messiah and announcer of "the great and terrible Day of the Lord" (Malachi 4: 5-6). That makes Jesus the Messiah (exactly as Peter has declared in 8:29). Jesus has a messianic mission: the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. However, it will not come about through a successful armed uprising against Rome, as people hoped in Jesus' time and during the Great revolt in Mark's own time.

Instead it will come about through Jesus' death (and resurrection). That is why Mark wants to emphasise that it is in their deaths at the hands of the political power-holders that Jesus and John are most deeply connected. That is why the disciples' first response to Jesus' question at Caesarea Philippi ("Who are people saying that I am?") is "John the Baptist" – ie John raised to life again after his murder by Herod Antipas.

That is precisely the terrible possibility voiced by Herod on hearing about the mission of The Twelve, carried out in Jesus' name (6:16). Herod's political power lay ultimately in capital punishment. If God had indeed raised John to life, then Herod's own world was at an end.

Look again at Mark's summary of The Twelve's mission activity (6: 12-13), which Herod heard: they proclaimed that everyone should repent, cast out demons, and anointed and cured the sick.

We have already learned from Mark that repentance is not about confessing private sin (of course, it must involve that!) but about re-orienting the whole of life in light of God's imminent reign over a world that has become God's Kingdom. The coming of the Kingdom means the removal of all the systems and people who currently hold sway. We've also learned that exorcism (the casting out of demons as hostile occupying forces) is a promise that Rome's own legions will be driven out and the people freed. It's all densely political – as political as it is spiritual, because the two are not actually separate. They cannot be, because we are talking about God's purposes for our world.

John's opposition to Antipas's second marriage was a political landmine. His first marriage had been to an Arabian princess who was the daughter of Aretas, king of Nabatea. It was a political alliance: Nabatea was one of the strongest regional powers and the marriage protected Herod against hostile invasion by Nabatea.

He had not been a good husband, and his wife had fled back to her father. Herod's marriage to Herodias was seen by many of Herod's own subjects as holding up two fingers to Aretas; there was a definite possibility that John's preaching against Herod's marriage could have provoked the Jewish inhabitants of Perea (Transjordan) into an insurrection in concert with any Nabatean forces sent by Aretas to avenge his daughter.

Ironically, Antipas was indeed eventually defeated by Aretas, which many Jews interpreted as punishment for his execution of John the Baptist!

Finally, we need to look at the shabby circumstances that lead to John's execution. Mark portrays a recognisable picture of a world in which human life is bartered to save royal face. Herod trades the head of the Baptist for rescue from his

own drunken oath (6: 24-8). Here is the same *real politik* that leads a Tony Blair to manufacture evidence about Iraqi WMDs; a David Cameron to call a referendum on UK membership of Europe in an attempt to control the warring factions within his own party; a Theresa May to make policy decisions on Brexit that shore up her own weak position a priority, even if they prove to be at the cost of Britain's greater good.

This is what Jesus will refer to as "the leaven of Herod" (8:15): the addiction to power and the willingness to commit any form of murder to eliminate whatever threatens that power and capacity to determine the shape and life of the world. That is true even when the challenge comes from the God who is acting in order to save the world. Then those who speak in God's name are in deadly danger from power-holders who will stop neither at beheading or crucifixion.

And Jesus' words to the church that bears his name, follows him as disciples and shares in his mission is, "It won't be any different for you! So if you want to be my disciples, pick up that cross ..."

Going deeper into the text (Mark 6: 6-29)

In this reading, we come across the Markan sandwich again. Three stories, side by side, with the account of John's execution as the 'filling' between the two apostolic mission (the sending out and returning of the disciples). The Markan sandwich suggests that John's persecution is part of the commitment to our discipleship and sign posted to Jesus' death on the cross. John's persecution warns us as disciples, people of 'the Way', that to preach repentance one must accept the risks of persecution by the powerful.

By weaving three stories of 'truth and consequences' Mark suggested a common destiny for all who preach repentance. Later Jesus will announce that the 'fate of Elijah' will hold true for the "Human One" (Chapter 9:11-13 and 12)

and for the disciples as well (Chapter 13:9-11).

Repentance means a 'change of heart'. The root cause of oppression by the Roman Empire as well as the oppression by the religious people such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees, was the lack of compassion. Jesus and all the prophets such as John was more concerned about liberation than a change of government. Jesus wanted a change that would effect every department of life and that would affect every department of life. Jesus wanted a qualitatively different world- the Kingdom of God.

Repentance, a change of heart isn't easy, it is to make an active choice daily towards compassion and to acknowledge that you were wrong. It is not a popular message, and the rejection of the prophets, John, the disciples, Jesus and the life and death of many martyrs and liberation theologians echo's this.

We live in a blaming and claiming culture. We often point the finger to a culprit or looking for a scapegoat. Jesus must have seen this first in the response of the people to John the Baptist's prophecy. The men of religion were unwilling to accept the fact that Israel was heading for destruction. The sinners, on the other hand flocked to John for baptism and repentance. Jesus soon discovered that it was the dutiful, loveless religious man, rather than the sinner, who was an obstacle to the coming of the kingdom of total Liberation. Jesus set out to liberate Israel from Rome by persuading Israel to change. We can only bring the Kingdom of God to this world if we, as the disciples of Jesus repent, have a change of heart towards compassion, before we blame the "Rome of today".

Growing up in Apartheid, South Africa I was a part of the Dutch Reformed Church who had to repent for supporting Apartheid. It was a painful process where people lost their careers for speaking out, relationships with family and friends ended and people lost their lives. Although I am sad that the Church was part of the oppression, I am grateful that, by the grace of God, we could be

also part of the repentance, the change of heart, the choice towards compassion.

What would you as church be prepared to give up, or to commit to, if it helped to show Jesus's compassion?

Think of something you as church do regularly which is more for your own benefit than someone else's benefit. Can you identify where as church you should repent and have a change of heart?

All age worship ideas (Mark 6: 6-29)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

Themes:

"Being sent" is an integral part of what it means to be a disciple. In churches we often think about how we might bring people in to our services of worship but here Jesus turns that idea on its head by instructing his friends to go out to where people are.

How well are we at 'going out'? Are we focused on 'bringing in' or going to where people are?

The Message version of this passage is useful tool in helping to unpack Jesus commission. The NIV says he gives them authority over 'impure spirits' which

may call to mind something supernatural. The Message version however talks of 'the evil opposition' giving a more human identity inferring those who would try and stop or challenge the teaching and authority of Jesus that the kingdom was imminent. Jesus could effectively be saying 'Don't take any nonsense from those who think they know better...'

Again in The Message translation/paraphrase, Jesus describes the disciples as 'the equipment'. They don't need anything else for the task, they have everything within themselves – all that they have learned and all that God will give them.

If they aren't made welcome then they should just move on – 'shake the dust off' is a bit like saying 'don't carry the disappointment or negativity with you – leave it where you found it then it can't hold you back.' It's a little like wiping your feet when you leave the house rather than when you came in...

These days we can be fearful of what people think of us, we can hold back on identifying ourselves as Christians or followers of Jesus especially when we are engaged in activities of blessing. We can be concerned about seeming to have an agenda...Well we do! Jesus sent out the disciples with a purpose to invite people to an experience of the kingdom.

The call to repent which the disciples shared is not an accusation rather an invitation – turn back from a life without God that has no destination and step into the life that God has for [you] now! Come home to God – the welcome mat is out!

Ideas:

Muslims often carry their prayer mats with them so they can pray wherever at the appropriate times. I wonder how strange people would find it if we carried

a Welcome mat with us and invited them to join us on it for a conversation?
Why not get a couple of people to stand on a welcome mat in the service and share their faith story?

Chris Duffett, a Baptist Minister in Cambridgeshire, works cross denominationally and does lots of creative things to help people engage with Jesus but more importantly he encourages the church to do the same. Below is from lightproject.org.uk which has lots of great ideas of doing church differently.

Here's one example:

Sunday Out

What if churches spent one Sunday a month 'out.' What if the majority of people that don't attend a church service would encounter church in pubs, cafes, parks or the streets? What if morning services were used to engage with people and love people who wouldn't consider going to Church?

Sunday Out projects have included a red carpet, a listening sofa, concerts in pubs and cafes, giveaways and painting. Simple ways to meet people and gently share something of the Christian faith with people who have yet to hear or understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

This passage gives us a great opportunity to open up the conversation and to think creatively – get some nicely decorated flipchart and some good writers and canvas ideas from the congregation – how can we help people to engage with Jesus? Whether we are a gifted evangelist, sporty, a great knitter and/or really good at caring and praying for people every gift is important and can be used by God!

The week before the service why not invite everyone who is comfortable to come in a sport strip or a club jumper or uniform (you may already have

uniformed organisations present) Normally you wouldn't put a couple of hockey players in a football team or swimmers in the bobsleigh team. You wouldn't get someone trained for the parachute regiment in a submarine crew yet when we are all together it serves as a reminder that no matter what we are good at or not Jesus wants to use what we have for the kingdom. His team is as mixed up and crazy as it can be! Thank goodness...

Prayer:

Give thanks for the rich diversity of human life and how God invites us all into his kingdom so that we can be part of all that he seeks to do on earth. Give thanks and intercede for those who serve in so many ways – perhaps invite people wearing different outfits and uniforms to read out the prayers. Remember that the team isn't finished – pray for confidence and for opportunities to share what Jesus means to us and for creative ways we can help people to engage with Jesus where they are.

Liturgies and hymns (Mark 6: 6-29)

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

The text for this Sunday is Mark 6: 6-29. It would be easy to focus on the calling of The Twelve, but we might also usefully explore the use and in and abuse of power that Herod displays, so attached are some resources around the theme of government and politics

A prayer for your Missional Partnership

Bless today our MP, [insert his/her name here] and lead and guide his/her

thoughts in ways of truth, justice and peace. Remind him/her of the people he/she represents, the democracy he/she believes in, and the trust that has been placed in him/her. Bless every decision he/she makes that is founded in integrity and humility and protect him/her from temptation to seek personal promotion or financial gain. Inspire him/her to work for the transformation of society and to campaign and vote for the good of our area, our nation, and the world. In the name of Jesus – who is our faithful representative?
Amen.

A prayer for all MPs and for our government that could be adopted for an opening sentence

Leader: In wise decision-making and good legislation

All: May our government lead us today.

Leader: In courageous re-thinking and creativity

All: May our government lead us today.

Leader: In fair representation of the people who elected them

All: May our government lead us today.

Leader: In honesty, fair dealing and integrity

All: May our government lead us today.

Leader: For the sake of the children, the marginalised and the weak

All: May our government lead us well today. Amen.

A prayer that could be used as a prayer of intercession:

Comfort, O comfort your people

We pray for those lives,

Made in your image,

Damaged by conflict.

Comfort, O comfort your people.

We pray for those in authority
That they may use their power
To bind wounds, heal relationships and find common ground.

Comfort, O comfort your people

We pray for a transforming peace,
Turning fear into trust,
Pain into hope
And doubt into confidence
for a better future.

Comfort, O comfort your people.

We pray for world leaders
That they may establish structures for justice,
Protecting human dignity,
Enabling reconciliation
And building God's kingdom.

Response: Comfort, O comfort your people.

Sue Cooper/CAFOD

A very specific prayer for those who have power, this would work well with different voices.

Father God, thank you, we praise you, for our country. Thank you that we live with relative peace and security, and that we have the freedom to speak out against injustice when we see it. Thank You for all of the good gifts that you've given us, for all that we have around us, especially those things we take for granted. To change our nation, I first ask Lord, that you change my heart towards it.

Father we pray that you would give us a government that loves justice, honesty and truth. A government that loves to bring healing to those in need, has compassion on those who are broken, and acts in our nation the way You would if You were walking around it.

Father we pray that you would give us politicians who have clarity, integrity, and passion for what is right. Give them great intelligence to solve problems, but please give them great strength of character, to stay away from anything corrupt, or sinful, as well.

Finally, Father, we pray that you would bring great healing to our nation where it needs it, bring about a generation who will stand against the tide of cynicism, to act justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you.

A closing prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you and the Father are one.

Amen

May your anger at injustice be alive in us?

Amen

May your love and wisdom, shown to humanity, find solutions that work for the poor.

Amen

May your compassion inspire us to put those solutions into practice?

Amen

And may all our work be not in our own strength, but in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Lord, your will is good.

By Hazel Palme