

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 12, 2009
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you can picture the Mediterranean Sea as an oblong clock, Israel would appear at the bottom of the curve of the eastern edge at about 4:30-5:00 o'clock. The river Jordan forms Israel's eastern border with modern day Jordan, with both countries sharing the rights to the Dead Sea. In ancient times, this area of Israel was the land of the Moabites, and the Ammonites. On the western side of the Dead Sea, was the land of Edom, in ancient times called Idumea. For those of you who know contemporary politics, the western edge of Idumea contains that infamous strip of land bordering the Mediterranean known as Gaza. 50 years before Jesus, when Pompey the Great conquered Judea in the name of the Roman Republic, Antipater II, known then as Antipater the Idumean, worked by his side and became well respected as a soldier and able tactician. When Julius Caesar subsequently defeated Pompey, Antipater aided him in his campaign in Alexandria and as a reward was made chief minister of Judea and given the right to govern and collect taxes. He appointed his two sons, Phasael to be governor of Jerusalem and Herod, to be governor of all of Galilee. Although already married once, Herod wanted to gain some points for marrying a good Jewish girl and so married his teen aged niece Mariamne, daughter of the last great Hasmonean ruler. He would marry again and often.

After the assassination of Julius Caesar, Antipater was accused of supporting those who murdered Caesar and was poisoned. As retribution for his father's assassination, Herod then killed all those involved in that plot and convinced Mark Antony and Emperor Octavian that his father was forced into aiding those who killed Caesar and worked his way back into the graces of the ruling elite. As a reward for his new found faithfulness, Herod was elevated to ruler and King of the entire region.

His life from this point on reads like a bad soap opera. Intrigue, murder, infidelity, were the least of his offenses, but he was politically shrewd and good at making alliances that profited him. He ruled for 34 years, all things considered a VERY long time in ancient Rome. For his longevity and political acumen, history records this Herod as Herod the Great. Chief among his accomplishments was the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, sometimes called Herod's Temple. He spared no cost, and recent excavations proved that he employed thousands of slaves to quarry and build it. The bible tells of its magnificence and splendor.

But this Herod is not the Herod you heard spoken of in the gospel reading this morning. That would be his son, Herod Antipas, the same Herod we read of in the trial and execution of Jesus.

When his father Herod the Great died in 4 BC, his territory was divided among his sons and young Herod was given Galilee and Perea. Young Herod Antipas, inherited his father's passion for building and during his long reign of over 40 years, built fortresses and stadiums, multiple palaces and of great significance, the royal capital city of Tiberius, named, of course after the Emperor, after all, you don't build a city for the people, you build it to accumulate points and favor. Herod invented lobbying and the concept of campaign contributions.

His life, too, reads like a bad soap opera. Early in his reign as tetrarch, he thought it would be a good idea to secure his southern border and so married the daughter of King Aretas, King of Nabatea, the kingdom to the immediate south of Idumea and Galilee. But while visiting Rome, at the home of his half brother, Herod Phillip II (who was the son of Herod and his first wife, Mariamne,) he fell in love with more than his brother's wife's cooking, if you know what I mean. They agreed to divorce their spouses and marry each other. When Herodius's father heard of it, he kidnapped her and brought her to his fortress to protect her. As you can imagine, relations soured and Herod and Aretas went to war. Herod won and won Herodius.

And so Herod Antipas, married Herodius, the wife of his half brother on his father, Herod the Great's side who was also daughter of the other son of Herod the Great Aristobulus IV, whose mother was Herod the Great's first wife Mariamne, whom he married after he dumped his first wife Doris and her son into exile. Which, by the way, was the same fate he and Herodius eventually suffered at the end of their reign, when the new Emperor Caligula, banished him to Lyon after hearing from Herodius' brother, Herod Agrippa, that he was in cahoots with the Parthians, that area to the north of Galilee known today as northeastern Iran. Caligula, banished only Herod, and allowed Herodius to return to her brother's home, but, to her credit, said she loved Herod and would join him in exile. Presumably, they died shortly thereafter. Tune in next week for the next episode of As the Middle East Turns.

The fact that Herod Antipas was marrying his father's granddaughter from his first marriage, who was also his half brother's wife, was the reason John the Baptist condemned him publicly when he arrived on the scene somewhere around 30 AD. It was the reason he was sitting in the prison nearby on the night of Herod's birthday party.

The gospel account you just heard, tells the story. Herod had a party, and during the party, his daughter was asked to dance. Tradition has her named Salome, who was Herodius's daughter from her first marriage (and so Herod's step daughter) which is why tradition also has him admiring her dance with less than fatherly affection, if you know what I mean.

Back to the story...

She dances and Herod, perhaps as the result of more than a little alcohol having been consumed at his birthday party, turns to her after her exhibition and says, "ask me for anything and it's yours....."

Now, we have no idea how old Salome was, or what her intentions were, but the gossamer tells us that she didn't ask for anything for herself, but instead, turns to her mother, Herodias, to ask her what she thinks would be a good reward. Now, I've already painted a clear picture of both Herod and Herodias for you and so it should come to you as no surprise that when Herodias tells her daughter to ask for something you shouldn't think for a moment, that it would be a new bike or a Barbie dream house. She tells her daughter instead, to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Now she does this not because John was preaching a radical gospel, one that would eventually lead us to Jesus and his challenge to the status quo and to Rome and her husband's power. No, she makes her request because John brought her infidelity and incest, and conniving and less than admirable lifestyle of both she and her husband to light. So, as long as her daughter could ask for anything, why not the head of John the Baptist, the largest thorn in her side?

Now, before you excuse the daughter's behavior based on her mother's request alone, note that the little girl adds her own macabre detail by saying, yes, give me the head of John the Baptist, but adds her own, "on a platter." I guess the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree after all.

So Herod, not wanting to lose face in the sight of his stepdaughter or his guests, grants her her wish, and John is killed.

It's not the first time, nor will it be the last, when the innocent are made guilty for someone else's indiscretion.

It's not first time nor will it be the last when one bad decision follows another.

It's not the first time nor will it be the last when alcohol rules the day and one rues the day it does.

It's not the first time nor will it be the last that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

John the Baptist played a significant and critical role in the history of salvation by setting the stage for the arrival of the message that Jesus brought. John was the bad cop to Jesus' good cop. John brought to light the need for repentance and Jesus offered an alternative to the way the world had always worked. John challenged the status quo and Jesus offered the new vision. Because it's not enough just to say what's wrong, without proposing what you think is right. I think back to the number of times I yelled at the television or the radio in past elections because I never once heard what the candidate would do to fix the mess, only what the other guy did to get us into it. I'm not a fool, I know what the problem is, can you help me find a solution?

Which is why John's death is such a true tragedy. Because he wasn't killed because he was a prophet, he wasn't killed because of his message, he wasn't killed because he challenged the status quo, he was killed because of vanity and pride, with a touch of alcohol and a healthy dose of bad DNA thrown in for good measure.

We have a short three letter word to describe that, it's called sin. And Jesus came to free us from its power.

Amen.