

April 21st 2013: John the Baptist #8 "Glory Bound" Mark 6:6-29

The story that Tom read to us this morning about the death of John the Baptist is one of the most horrible and gruesome accounts in the Bible. To hear the details of how such a faithful and loyal servant of God died because of his refusal to back away from the truth he had been called to proclaim, is not easy and can be quite threatening. For with this story comes the realization that John was simply seeking to live out his life for God. Simply seeking to be obedient to his holy calling. Something we who follow Jesus are also called to, and yet such lead to his martyrdom.

Some indeed may argue that John brought his imprisonment and death upon himself by his unwillingness to back away from a situation where speaking against Herod Antipas' personal life was sure to result in his own violent end. For Herod came from a family of tyrants who were well known for their murderous ways against those that would dare to question their rule or behavior. So for John to proclaim the marriage of Herod to Herodias as so wrong in the sight of God that it demanded God's wrath and judgment, was asking for trouble.

So why didn't John just keep on 'Preparing the way for Jesus' by being The Voice crying in the wilderness, and thus avoid this political hot potato altogether? The answer was that John's task involved him in calling the people to repentance and to a holy life style in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, and the people included everyone, from slave to king. Herod and Herodias needed to hear the message and have the opportunity to repent and escape the coming judgment just as much as anyone else. And as far as John the Baptist was concerned he would not be faithful to God if he refused to use the opportunity given to him to tell Herod and Herodias exactly what God thought about their unholy alliance as man and wife.

John well knew the risks, but for him being faithful to the God he served was always a priority.

This was also the case for a Uganda Christian by the name of Joseph Mukasa, who lived at the time of a dreadful killing of Christians by two Ugandan kings in the 1880's. Joseph was a personal attendant for both these kings and also a dedicated Christian. He had brought Christ to many of the five hundred young men and boys who worked as court pages, and they relied on his leadership and his clear grasp of the faith.

Joseph had the old king's respect, too, for he had once killed a poisonous snake with his bare hands as it was about to strike his master. But King Mwanga was even more unstable than his father. He was soon affected by the poisonous lies of jealous advisors, who called Joseph disloyal for his allegiance to another king, the "God of the Christians."

Their accusations were reinforced when Joseph Mukasa reprimanded King Mwanga for trying to have the newly arrived Anglican bishop put to death. Furious that anyone would dare to oppose him, the King went ahead with the assassination.

Joseph could have played it safe and chosen not to cross the king again. I guess like John the Baptist could have played it safe. But instead, Joseph enraged Mwanga even more by repeatedly opposing his attempts to use the younger pages as his sex partners. Joseph not only taught the boys to resist but made sure they stayed out of Mwanga's reach.

The King finally decided to make Joseph an example, ordering him to be burned alive as a conspirator. But here, too, Joseph Mukasa proved the stronger and braver. He assured his executioner that "a Christian who gives his life for God has no reason to fear death... . Tell Mwanga," he also said, "that he has condemned me unjustly, but I forgive him with all my heart." The executioner was so impressed with Joseph that he beheaded him swiftly before tying him to the stake and burning his body.

That death was followed by many others as those Christian page boys were forced to decide between turning away from Christ, or dying for Him in the most shocking way. The majority chose to die.

I first heard about those martyrs at the time when Idi Amin was also killing Christians in Uganda in the mid 1970's, and remembered vividly from that time the quotation of the second century church father Tertullian, that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. And how such was seen to be true in Uganda.

In a sense it was true with John the Baptist too, for his death at that time in the ministry of Jesus led to a turning away from John, whose following had always been great, to Jesus who John had always sought to point to.

But I believe we see in the death of John the fulfillment of the prophecy he had made about himself that is recorded in John 3:30.(The Message)

"He must grow greater and greater and I less and less."

Some weeks ago I made reference to this statement, and you may remember from then that its context was where John talked about himself as the bridegroom's friend. As the one who made God's people, the bride, ready to meet his friend the bride groom—Jesus.

And how once John became sure that Jesus as the Messiah—as the bridegroom—had truly come, then he knew that his work was completed.

I sense that such an assurance came only after John's period of doubting that he experienced in prison, and which led to his sending of messengers to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus' response, that we looked at last week, satisfied John, and I believe it motivated him to speak even more to Herod during those times when Herod would sit and listen to John. For Mark tells us in 6:20(J B Phillips)

"Herod used to listen to him and be profoundly disturbed, and yet he enjoyed hearing him."

Now that 'the king enjoyed listening' to him suggests that John had more to give than just a nasty telling off each time. Herod could have hardly enjoyed listening to that! But what Herod would have had to enjoy was the excitement with which John spoke about Jesus as the Messiah who had come to set up His kingdom for those who would repent, change their life style, and fully follow Him. Something of course that Herod felt unable to do, and therefore he ended each session full of guilt and profoundly disturbed.

But John I'm sure, would have ended each session with a fresh assurance that he had fulfilled his task. That now he could wait with some degree of satisfaction for whatever happened next, because his influence as the forerunner had decreased as he said it would. And the Lord's impact would now increase in leaps and bounds.

Therefore John would have met his death, as brutal as it was, with a sense of being bound for glory. He had completed the task given him without faltering and he would therefore receive one day from His God the declaration, "Well done you good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master."

Like every other martyr then and now—and there are people facing death because of their faith somewhere in the world right this minute—they died

ready to be taken into the arms of their Lord. To pass from this place where evil is often so apparent to that place where: (1 Cor 2:9)

***"What God has planned
for people who love him
is more than eyes have seen
or ears have heard.
It has never even
entered our minds!"***

John's death, unnecessary and evil as it may seem to us, was still a testimony to God's greatness and God's goodness. He gave John the grace, I'm sure, to bear it, and then used it to take His most loyal servant home.

His death therefore reminds us that death is still a triumph for the believer, however it may happen, and because of that no fear, even the ultimate fear of death, should ever cause us to back away from being the messenger of God that He has called each of us to be.

And then, the other thing that John's death reminds us about is that although we may never find ourselves in a situation like John's, there are plenty of believers in the world who will. Believer's in North Korea, in China, in India and Pakistan and many other places who will spread the Gospel through their martyrdom.

We need to pray for them and seek to learn about their needs. We need to sacrificially contribute in any way we can. We need to somehow embrace them in some way as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And because of their example and the greater example of Christ we must commit ourselves to avoiding the easy pathway of selfish Christianity, and commit ourselves to giving just that little bit more of our resources than is comfortable. That little more of our voice than is safe. And that little more of our time, in the passionate pursuit of spreading the Gospel throughout the world.

