

Sermon. Trinity 6. Alderholt. 2021.

“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...”

Those lines of Shakespeare from ‘As You Like It’ I have chosen to serve my purposes for an exploration of this morning’s gospel reading. I am sure Shakespeare would turn in his grave given the exploitation of his text.

What a drama we are presented with! Herod Antipas, the local Roman governor, Salome his wife’s first marriage daughter, the mother of Herodias, and the ghostly figure of John the Baptist, and by implication the person of Jesus himself.

The unfolding of the plot seems to have evolved from rumours abounding about these two popular characters Jesus and John the Baptist. The idea of that John’s death points forward to Jesus’ own death is underlined elsewhere in Mark where John is identified with Elijah. Perhaps we can safely assume Mark wants his readers to see the contrast between John, who is buried and about whom only rumours of resurrection circulate, and Jesus, who is buried and raised from the dead. We have to go on reminding ourselves that when we read stories like today’s reading, we do so as Easter people i.e. is people who know of Christ’s resurrection.

And we know what havoc rumours cause! Did you know that Simon Woodley.....?

So, let’s try and get under the skin of each person in this drama; who are they and what motivates their behaviour?

First then, Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great). He wasn’t a King so much as a tetrarch, local governor of Galilee and Peraea. The real power resided in Rome. We are told he had ‘heard of the healings and other miracles’ and of Jesus fame. What was more important is that there was a rumour that John the Baptist who Herod had beheaded has been raised from the dead. I guess that went down like a ton of bricks! One can imagine that Herod was puzzled and feeling somewhat ambiguous about this news.

We are given to understand by Mark that Herod had ambiguous feelings about John 'he both feared John knowing that he was a holy and righteous man, and he protected him'; and, he was a very proud man who couldn't lose face with his wife who through her daughter Herodias asked for the head of John the Baptist. He was an inveterate pleaser. And so, for our Church and political leaders! How many times have you said 'yes' when you mean 'no'? What lies have you told so as not to lose face? We are all ambivalent until the chips are down-in Herod's case with dire consequences. John simply becomes a disposable puppet. Paul admonishes us "let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be no". Pleasing others very often leaves us resentful because our own needs have not been met. Once OK but a constant pattern leaves us disgruntled and often depressed.

Secondly, Herod's Wife, Herodias the willing accomplice of her daughter Herodias commonly known as Salome. Well, she was married to the local governor who daily exercised his power over the populace of Galilee and surrounding areas. Why not have a piece of the action! What is more she was the previous wife of Herod's brother Philip, Herod's sister-in-law and John made it clear at some point that he did not approve of this arrangement! Like many relationships it all seems to have been a bit of a mess. Because of Jewish Law Herodias couldn't divorce her husband Philip so she just left and became Herod's wife. John's condemnation of their liaison hit home! Hence, the grudge of Herodias against John. With the exercise of power comes responsibility. Here we see power wielded to the destruction of another. We only have to turn on the 6 o'clock news to see naked power destroying individuals and nations in its wake-Nepal, Syria, Afghanistan, Hong Kong; the results of the gun culture in America and closer to home the proposed expulsion of asylum seekers to Africa; the wrongful imprisonment of Post Office employees...the list sadly goes on. It is power with the . Maybe we shall not know what was in Mark's mind. However as always when we read about John, we know we are hearing something about Jesus of Nazareth. Both John and Jesus are put to death by political leaders who recognise their goodness, but who weakly give into pressure.

As we observe the behaviour of these three characters in this drama of beheading our attention is drawn to another way of being, another way of living. How can we describe that way? Like John and Jesus in that first century

Palestine, that way is going to be contrary to the prevailing culture-what we now call countercultural, which means a complete turnaround, a metanoia to us a highbrow Greek word, what John the Baptist calls repentance.

More than ever before in our history, we need a new kind of personal and social fuel. Not fear, but love. Not prejudice, but openness. Not supremacy, but service. Not inferiority, but equality. Not resentment, but reconciliation. Not isolation, but connection. Not the spirit of hostility, but the holy Spirit of hospitality.

It would be easy for us to leave church here today and think, well it is a bit of a horror story and refers to them, whoever they are, out there. My friends we must look first within. Like any good drama we need to reflect how we share aspects of the characters in the drama. How many rumours have you spread or been complicit in their onward journey? Do you like a bit of power, if so, do you use it to have power over people or as a way of empowering others in their lives? How many times have you said 'yes' when you meant 'no' and failed another? Are you proud? Yes, of course, so am I, but let us know that what the world would deem weakness can be a huge strength and be an encouraging sign to others. That is the way of love and how difficult it is!

I would like to finish in a literary vein as I began. It is a lovely sonnet by Malcolm Guite, poet, priest and song-writer, Chaplain of Girton College, Cambridge: St. John' Eve.