

Idols

I speak to you today in the name of Jesus Christ, who calls on us to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds.

Good morning! I am happy to speak to you again today, though for a last time, as my work at Redeemer will be completed at the end of this month. I'd like to thank you all again for your very warm welcome and for so kindly including me and teaching me so much. I am glad to discover this jewel of a church, and I look forward to staying in touch.

I want especially to thank Cricket, David and Sue for being such great role models and mentors, especially with preaching. The deacon has a special responsibility in the church to preach the Gospel, and especially, the Gospel's message of justice. I got some excellent practice here the first two times I preached, which, you may recall, happened to be on Gospel passages that lent themselves perfectly to a diaconal message of justice.

But wow, I have to admit that today's Gospel presents a whole different kind of challenge. What a story! Seductive women, powerful men, locked in confrontation, all against a backdrop of ambition, decadence, lust, betrayal and murder! When I told my husband this was the passage I was to preach on today, he said it sounded more like material for Hollywood than for a sermon. He wasn't wrong - the story of the beheading of John the Baptist has stirred the creative imagination more than almost any other story in the Bible than the Passion itself. Maybe you've seen the dramatic paintings depicting it by Titian or Caravaggio, or read Oscar Wilde's play, heard the Strauss opera or viewed one of the many Hollywood films based on today's Gospel.

But one thing is noticeably missing in this story, at least on the surface. I'm sure you know what it is - Jesus! This is the only story in Mark in which Jesus neither appears, nor speaks, and

in fact gets barely a mention in passing, when Herod misidentifies him as a resurrected John the Baptist. This is the Gospel - but where's the star? Where's the good news? Where's the grace? What is the lesson we are to take away from this passage, which Mark curiously inserts in his Gospel between powerful accounts of Jesus' ministry and miracles?

Consider, first, the similarities in John's and Jesus' stories as illustrated in this passage - stories that are interwoven even before their births, in the deep friendship of their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth. John, like Jesus to come, is a reputed religious leader who dies a violent death at the hands of political power, as a direct result of how he lived his life and what he taught. Herod, like Pilate to come, is a political leader who is squeamish about condemning his captive, uncomfortably conscious that he is innocent of any crime and understanding at some level that he represents something much larger than his accusers grasp. But Herod, again like Pilate, nonetheless falls prey to serving his ambition first, killing John despite his misgivings, because he is more concerned about maintaining his reputation and popularity than in doing justice. Evil triumphs in both John's and Jesus' deaths. And then disciples of both Jesus and John claim their bodies and place them in tombs. Mark, thus, uses this retrospective report of the death of John to foreshadow the coming passion of Jesus.

Consider, second, the very clear and very stark message Mark delivers in this passage about the costs of discipleship. John the Baptist was a prophetic voice, in the true sense of that phrase: he was an uncompromising truth teller. He did not hesitate to criticize political power when truth and justice were at stake. And John paid for it - first with his freedom and then with his life, as did almost all the apostles, and the many martyrs, who built the early church. As did Martin Luther King in our own time. It is never convenient or comfortable to criticize the powers that

be in the name of truth and justice; this story reminds us that it can, at times, be dangerous and even deadly. But this, Mark is telling us, is the potential cost of discipleship.

So Mark uses this passage to foreshadow Christ's passion and to illustrate the costs of following Jesus. But where, once again, is the good news and the grace in this Gospel passage? I agree - it is not immediately evident. But we do find it, I believe, in Herod's struggle and in his choice. Let me tell you why.

Herod is an interesting character. Mark calls him "King Herod," but he does so either erroneously or ironically, because Herod never received the title of king - though he desperately wanted it and pursued it all his life. In fact, Herod's final plea to Emperor Caligula to grant him that title resulted in the loss of his position and his death in exile. Herod is prey to his lusts, certainly - divorcing his first wife for an incestuous marriage with a woman who was his niece and the wife of his half-brother, and making a rash public vow to reward a pleasing dance by his stepdaughter. Following through on such vows, in the Jewish tradition, was very important, especially for someone with a public position to maintain. And Herod cared a great deal about his position.

But note - Mark's Herod is no one-dimensional villain. It appears that he has some intriguing better instincts. Indeed, Mark shows us a degree of discernment and even conscience in Herod. Mark tells us that "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." And Mark tells us that Herod was "deeply grieved" at the request that John be killed, and that Herod's first reaction when hears about this man Jesus - in regret at what he had done, with hope, perhaps, that it could be reversed? - his first reaction is that Jesus is John the Baptist,

resurrected. Herod recognized something special in John - and yet, he had him killed, to save his reputation.

The picture Mark paints of Herod, then, is a picture of a person who is deeply human. A mixture of light and darkness, like all of us. Made in the image of God, with that spark of the divine, but deeply flawed. A person who, as Paul tells us in Romans 7, knows that God's commandment is holy and just and good, but - again, like all of us - is of the flesh, "sold into slavery under sin," and prone to doing not the good we want, but the evil we do not want.

And what is the force that leads Herod, and so often leads us, down this path? It is the sin of idolatry. Idolatry - the worship of something other God, which separates us from God. None of us is free from this impulse. As Brother Geoffrey Tristram of the Society of St. John the Evangelist writes, "Everybody worships. Everybody gives ultimate worth to something or someone in their lives. If it is not God, it will be a lesser god: maybe it will be a golden calf of our own creation, wealth, or power, or the superb skills of a footballer, or the voice of Elvis Presley." Theologian Marcus Borg points to the top three American idols as the "A's" - achievement, affluence, attractiveness. The human heart, in sum, is indeed a factory of idol-making, as John Calvin is reputed to have said.

Even more than sexual lust, Herod is prey to his lust for power. That was his idol. Mark tell us that he orders the death of John the Baptist "out of regard for his oaths and for the guests" - what they would think of him. Herod opts for evil over what he knows is right to serve the god of his ambition, to preserve his image, his position and his power. If Mark's Gospel concluded here, it would be a dark ending indeed.

But we know it doesn't. We know how the bigger story ends. How God triumphs over evil and death in the resurrection of Jesus. And we know where Jesus points us, as the first and greatest commandment - to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our minds, and as the commandment says, to worship no other God before him. We can imagine that Herod might have made a different choice. A choice not to succumb to the idol of his ambition, but to his better instincts. A choice to follow instead the divine spark within him that led him to recognize, as Mark tells us he does, that John was a righteous and holy man.

That is the good news and the grace I find in this Gospel passage. We have the choice. We know that our redemption lies not in service to the gods of this world, however beguiling they may be, but in service to the one God, in whom we live and move and have our being.

But we are all human, like Herod. We are all subject to idol-making. What might our temptations - our idols - be? And when they rise up before us, will we make the right choice?

Amen