

[Mark 6:14-29](#)

I expect that, like me, most or all of you have been besieged in the last few years with scam messages – some by phone, some by email, others by text message.

The other day my mobile phone began ringing and it identified the calling number as being in Czech Republic. I have no connections with that country. At a push, I could name one or two of their footballers, but that's about it. So I ignored the call.

It nevertheless went to my voicemail, and I later retrieved a message accusing me of misusing my National Insurance number and demanding I press 1 on my keypad to speak to an officer. Well, not likely! And all the more so, given that much of my work in the Civil Service was to do with National Insurance numbers! I can't say I lost any sleep over it.

But sometimes these messages hope to trick people by playing on a possible sense of guilt. That's certainly the idea behind those messages which say they've loaded software on your computer and they know all about your viewing of pornographic websites. The criminals hope that someone who has done that will be so terrified that they will be duped into the scam.

When there is lurking guilt over our past actions, all sorts of things can trigger a response of fear. I think that's what happens in our reading when Herod Antipas hears about the ministry of Jesus. He thinks that John the Baptist, whom he ordered to be beheaded, has been raised from the dead (verses 14-16) and perhaps he's come back to haunt him or expose him.

This is not the same Herod as who tried to kill the infant Jesus – that was the so-called Herod the Great. This is one of his sons. Herod Antipas proved to be every bit as ruthless as his wicked father, but he didn't have the same political skill. He wasn't actually a king, but he liked to be known as one – hence 'King Herod', as Mark calls him, is an ironic title. He also loved luxury and magnificent architecture. Jesus summed up his character in Luke's Gospel when he called him 'that fox'¹.

If you want an example of his lack of political skill, the divorce which John condemns morally here got Herod into trouble politically as well. His first wife, whom he so cruelly dumped for his sister-in-law, was the daughter of Aretas, king of Nabatea, a region east of the Red Sea. Aretas took out reprisals against

Herod, inflicting a crushing military defeat on him in AD 36. Three years later the Emperor Caligula had had enough of Antipas, and he banished him and Herodias to Gaul (modern-day France)².

Ultimately, the life of Herod Antipas is a story of someone who was never willing to be free of his baser instincts. They harmed him and others. Imagine the innocent people killed when Aretas took out his reprisals – all because Antipas wouldn't control his lusts. Imagine the pain of John's disciples and family at his execution, because Antipas wanted to suppress his conscience and also made such a foolish vow in front of witnesses to his daughter.

When we would rather pursue our own selfish desires there are costs not just to ourselves but to others as well. It's surely clear that one of the reasons for the huge rates of family breakdown in our society is to do with that. I know the situation is more complicated than that, but by way of illustration consider this: Becky more or less forgot Father's Day this year. Why? Because she had planned to go out that evening with five friends. None of those five friends had a father living at home, and so Father's Day just wasn't on their agenda, and hence Becky, mingling with these friends, forgot too. Obviously, I don't know why all her friends' parents split up, but inevitably I wonder.

The life of Herod Antipas, then, is a sombre warning for us about what life looks like and what life leads to when we live without the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Sin has devastating consequences. If we cherish our sin above other things, we wreak havoc in our lives and the lives of others, both those close to us and strangers.

And that's without even talking about the eternal consequences of choosing sin over grace. In some respects the consequences in this life can be variable. Depending on how just the society is and how much power the offender has, someone may or may not get away with brutality or slavery to one's own senses and appetites.

But eternity is different. There, a verdict is certain and so is a sentence. It involves eternal separation from God, the source of love, truth, and beauty. What kind of existence would that be?

But while that sentence may be certain it is not inevitable. What Herod Antipas needed was grace. It was tantalisingly close to him, if only he had accepted it. John the Baptist's call to repentance was the call to put himself in the place where he could receive the free and unmerited grace of God. The ministry of

Jesus that he heard about and which evidently troubled his conscience would have done the same, only more.

When we struggle with unhealthy desires, or with good desires gone bad, there is a remedy, and it is the grace of God. For in Christ God looks at each of us with favour yet in the full knowledge of our sin, providing forgiveness at the Cross. There is hope for us when we struggle with our besetting sins. There is hope for those who are addicted to their passions. That hope is found only in Jesus. To him we turn in our own need; to him we point when others are in similar need.

So, if **one** thing we learn from **history** in this passage is about ***our need of grace***, what might we learn from the **context** of the reading?

You see, all we've done here is read this particular episode. But this story is the filling in a sandwich, something Mark does quite a bit. He puts one narrative inside another. So, if this is the filling, we need to look at what forms the slices of bread.

The filling ends with the decapitation of John, his head presented on the same kind of platter from which Herod's dinner guests had been eating, and then we get the grief of John's disciples as they bury his body (verses 28-29). The taste of the filling is pretty horrible.

It makes us think of persecutions right up to this day, where evil regimes and organisations seek to 'decapitate' a movement by targeting its leaders³. Only the other day I read the story of how the Chinese police had arrested the pastor of a church under false charges of fraud, so that he was removed from his congregation. It used to be that the Chinese authorities targeted the unregistered churches, but now they are also going after the churches that registered with the government as well.

And every week, my prayer email from Christian Solidarity Worldwide documents similar stories around the world – from obvious places like China, North Korea, Pakistan, and Iran to Nigeria, Mexico, India, Sri Lanka and many other nations.

We often give thanks for the freedom with which we can worship God, but we live in a generation where across the world there has never been more persecution of those who own the name of Christ. It's something the first readers of Mark's Gospel would have understood well, living in Rome where

Claudius had expelled Jews, including leaders of some early Christian groups, and where Nero was using the Christians as scapegoats. Many of them would face the same fate as John the Baptist.

As I said, it's an ugly filling to the sandwich. It's enough to cause despair.

But that's why you need the slices of bread on either side. Because Mark has sandwiched this inside the account of Jesus sending his disciples two by two on mission to villages to proclaim and demonstrate the kingdom of God. In verse 13, immediately before our reading, we hear that they cast out many demons and healed a lot of people; in verse 30, the verse immediately after our reading, they return to Jesus and tell him all their amazing stories.

Therefore if the filling of the sandwich is a sombre warning that being a disciple can come at a terrible cost, the bread of the sandwich tells us that no matter what happens, no matter how much evil forces seek to decapitate the kingdom of God movement, the mission always goes on. God will not allow his mission to be defeated by the forces of evil.

Here is the good news for the faithful believing church. Whatever attempts are made to curb the influence of the Gospel, be it secular opponents, hostile groups from other religions, or even those within the church structures want the Gospel to capitulate to modern cultural norms, the assurance here is that the Gospel will prevail. We could lose our leaders, we could lose our buildings, we could lose our finances and charitable status, but Jesus will never stop building his church.

This apparently gruesome tale, then, is a good news story. There is good news for God's faithful people even in the face of opposition and suffering. And there is good news for sinners who will cast themselves upon the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

¹ Luke 13:32

² On Herod Antipas, see James R Edwards, *The Gospel According To Mark*, p184.

³ I take this idea from Ian Paul's blog post [What Is God Doing During The Beheading Of John The Baptist?](#)