

## **Pentecost 8 B**

Amos 7:7-15

Psalms 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

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Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ. Amen.

Quick survey: if this story of John's beheading is one of your favorite five Bible stories put your hand up.

This story of John's beheading is one of my favorites. That might sound like a really odd thing to say given what happens. But this paradoxical thing happens when this story is read. Did you hear it? We heard together the story of a man wrongly imprisoned, the graphic and tragic ending of his life, and the hasty funeral... then I said: "the gospel of the Lord." And you said: "praise be to Christ."

Are you sure about that? Are you sure that is what you want to say in response to this story? Because I'll let you take it back, this time.

It's a difficult story to hear. It doesn't sound anything like a miraculous healing, it doesn't sound anything like "love your neighbour as yourself," it certainly doesn't sound very promising that Jesus didn't stop the murder of his beloved cousin, it doesn't have the feel-good-vibe like when Jesus said 'bring the little children to me.' It's a text that leaves us uneasy because bad things are not supposed to happen to good people.

But good news can also be that which uncovers problems. Like a dressing being pulled back, it's only once the infection is exposed that it may be cleaned and healing can begin. This is just what Mark is doing.

Mark juxtaposes two competing ways of life: that of those who held positions of power and that of people committed to the way of Christ. Herod gives a party and invites the who's who of society. The guests are those with government connections, with military rank and people with influential commercial might (*picture "The Dragon's Den" on steroids.*)

These are the people Herod was really interested in. Yes, he liked John, but that's as far as it went. Herod knew if he was to get anywhere in life he had to hang out with the "right" circle of people. Even his first marriage was one of political maneuvering for power. The party Mark describes is a sarcastic caricature of life when it becomes self-centred. When power

and money and privilege become the core principles in decisions made, when a human life is bartered to save face, when a young dancer gets more attention than a truth-telling prophet – these are all signs that Mark uses to point out how society was deeply opposed to the way of Jesus.

That's is certainly not us. ...is it?

Rev. Dr. Caroline Lewis in a commentary on this passage wrote:

*Do not let this pericope pass you by without asking yourself, really interrogating your ministry, your preaching -- does my preaching, does my witness, does my ministry ever warrant my head on a platter? Or, do I avoid any kind of proclamation that might lead to my own beheading, metaphorical or otherwise?*

That is very stark and to the point, but true. And the reason for that is because people of faith will suffer as long as there is injustice. No, it doesn't mean that we will all end up with the same fate as John, but it does mean that our hearts and consciences must be troubled by what we witness on a day to day basis and if we are troubled, then we are also called to stand up.

The Way of Christ will never condone commodification of children. It will never accept abuse of the earth. It will never agree with practices that make the gap between rich and poor acceptable. It will never be silent when power is held by an elite class. The way of Christ is not military, economic or cultural might, but is equality, love, justice, peace.

As people of faith, we work hard to try to follow that way. Obviously, we don't do it perfectly. Sometimes we get side tracked; we might find ourselves frustrated over something in worship, we might admit we don't give as much as we could, we know have a lot to learn about God, but we just don't make the time – there's lots of unimportant things that get in our way too often. When that happens it's as if we're at Herod's party. It's like we're not really in control of what is happening and all of a sudden, things take a tragic turn.

Following God invites us into an intentional way of life, a way where we are clear who and who's we are. A way that leaves us feeling like we don't have to impress others or even ourselves, but where we can learn to be the beautiful person we were created to be. Let me share a little story to illustrate:

*Once in a monastery two monks walked about doing their morning duties. As they passed a small bowl, filled with rain, they saw a scorpion was drowning in the water. One monk reached in to save the creature. As soon as his fingers touched the panicking Scorpion, it stung him and the monk dropped the Scorpion back into the water. The monk sighed, and reached back in. This time he got his grip a little firmer, but still dropped the Scorpion when he was stung. He kept reaching in, as his friend looked on in confusion. After dozens of attempts, the other monk spoke up saying "Brother, why do you keep trying to save that scorpion? It stings you every time you come near it. The monk paused before reaching in again and smiled. As another sting bit into his hand, he took a fallen leaf from the ground and pulled the scorpion out to safety. He finally said: "Because it is his nature to sting, and my nature to save.*

Be who you are. No matter what. Learning to be who we are, comes out of moments of joy and laughter, but also out of challenge and difficulty. Don't be afraid of either.

Amen.