

John the Baptist beheaded ...

... a question of loyalty

A sermon given on Sixth Sunday After Trinity 11th July 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Attended Communion Service

Mark 6:14-29

In the 1730s, the poet Alexander Pope gave a puppy to the then Prince of Wales who lived at Kew and on its collar was engraved a little verse, *'I am His Highness's dog at Kew. Pray tell me sir, whose dog are you?'* The poet was making the point that we are all answerable to somebody or something. So I wonder this morning, whose dog are you? To whom are you answerable or to whom do you give your allegiance? Perhaps it's your husband or wife; perhaps it's your employer or business; perhaps it's God or your church; perhaps it's the state or your sense of nationhood. Where it gets interesting is when there is more than one thing claiming our allegiance. What happens when there's a clash of loyalties? If you're English but married to an Italian, who will you be supporting in this evening's football match? In the news the other day, it was clear that the directors of Southern Water had a stronger loyalty to their shareholders than they did to keeping the laws against polluting the environment. And every PCC meeting now begins with members having to declare any conflicts of interest. *'I am His Highness's dog at Kew. Pray tell me sir, whose dog are you?'*

Our gospel reading this morning tells us about the clashing loyalties of three different people and how this question of loyalty defines who we are. In the reading, John the Baptist knows who comes first in his life, and he's not afraid to suffer for it. He's not afraid to call out the Pharisees and Sadducees for their hypocrisy, even though they were the role models, the opinion formers, the influencers if you like, of their day. He's not afraid to challenge the tax collectors about their greed and dishonesty, which is a bit like telling the Mafia to give up their extortion rackets. He does the same with the Roman soldiers who are people who could easily have had him killed without any fear for the consequences. And now we see John confronting King Herod for divorcing his wife in order to marry Herodias, who was herself already married. It was a bit like criticising Henry the Eighth for divorcing Catherine of Aragon, when you've got Anne Boleyn standing next to you. If you do that sort of

thing, you're going to get into trouble and your friends will quickly make themselves scarce.

But John doesn't seem to be worried. That's because he's being faithful to a higher loyalty and he's clear about that in his own mind. Like the other prophets in the Old Testament tradition, he says what he says not out of self-interest, but out of a sense that he's compelled to do it. His loyalty to God gives him no other option. Like Martin Luther in another age, who said, "*Here I stand. I can do no other.*" So John is defined by his prophetic calling, it shapes him and gives him his sense of identity. That's why he's not afraid, because he's being true not only to his calling and his God, but in the end to himself as well.

I wonder if you've ever had to make that kind of choice where your calling as a Christian and your commitment to try and do the right thing, comes with a price tag? Where there's a temptation to take the easy option, but it comes at the cost of your integrity? To give you a relatively trivial example, say you're out shopping and you accidentally scratch another car in the car park - there's no one else around, so do you take responsibility and leave a note under the windscreen wiper with your name and phone number, knowing that this is going to have implications for your insurance and your no-claims bonus and all the hassle and perhaps humiliation of admitting that you're responsible? Or do you drive off and hope no one will notice? John is clear about his loyalty to God. But it's costly.

Herodias, on the other hand is clear about her loyalty - only to herself. She's only interested in maintaining her own position and that of her children. She won't tolerate any challenge to that and is ruthless in protecting her own interests. She's conscious that in her position as Judea's first lady, she's dependent on her husband, who is showing worrying signs of listening to John's rebuke. So she feels that her public position, her status, her livelihood, her very sense of her own self, are all under attack from John. At some level, Herodias is aware that her life is built on lies and cruelty, but she doesn't want to face the truth. She has long since sacrificed her integrity, to keep herself at the centre of her own little universe. Luther once said that '*Sin is merely a human heart curved in on itself.*' And that exactly describes Herodias. But maintaining that position is very stressful for her because everything outside her bubble is experienced as a threat.

I wonder whether you know anybody like that? They may be gifted, powerful people or they may be people who are more ordinary but are so self-absorbed, so unreliable and uncommitted to anything other than themselves, that they're always puffing themselves up at the expense of those around them and are quick to blame others when things go wrong.

So John the Baptist and Herodias are both single-minded in their loyalties: John is loyal to something bigger than himself, so his loyalty is costly; Herodias is loyal only to herself, and avoids paying any cost except that to her own integrity.

King Herod's loyalties are genuinely divided: on the one hand he's king, he has to keep his grip on power which means he can't completely ignore public opinion - he has to appear strong and decisive; on the other hand, he's not as hardened against the truth as Herodias. Mark tells us that Herod feared John knowing that he was a righteous and holy man. And it's true, isn't it, that absolute rulers are often afraid of the truth. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn said in his speech accepting the Nobel prize for literature in 1978, "*One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world.*" Herod recognised that and was afraid of John, that John was right to condemn him. So when Herod rashly makes a public promise to Herodias's daughter to give her anything she asks and she comes back and says, "*Give me the head of John the Baptist*", Herod is caught. He doesn't want to hurt John, but he can't afford to lose face. In the end, his loyalty to power and position and reputation outweighs his loyalty to the truth. Mark says that Herod was deeply grieved - perhaps not so much for the death of John as for the loss of his own integrity. His loyalty in the end was to what was convenient and easy and selfish, rather than to what was true and right.

People often have a low opinion of their leaders, don't they? And one of the reasons is because public figures so often face this kind of dilemma. Do I cover this up? Do I deny responsibility? Do I break my promises? Or, do I tell the truth and risk losing face; risk losing public support; and ultimately risk losing power? But in a less dramatic way, we all of us face these choices: do I stubbornly stick to a wrong course of action rather than admit I made a mistake? Do I sometimes prefer to blame someone else rather than take responsibility? Do I break a promise to one person because I want to keep in with another?

John the Baptist kept his integrity but lost his life, and the passage ends with us being told his disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. I wonder, does

that remind you of anybody else, someone else in the New Testament whose life paralleled that of John the Baptist in other ways, someone who is faithful to his calling under God saying, "Not my will, but yours be done", who fell foul of those in power and whose followers came and laid his body in a tomb only for it to be raised again on the third day, just as Herod had feared had happened with John.

John is a tragic hero, but maybe his death wasn't the end of the story. Maybe those who are loyal to their calling and to their identity as the children of God don't need to shy away from taking the difficult course of action, because they can be confident that in the end, the God of the resurrection will not abandon them.

Whatever choices you may be facing this morning and whatever loyalties may be under pressure, we come this morning to the Lord who is faithful and whose love for you and me took him to the cross and beyond, into the garden outside the tomb.

However uncertain our loyalty to him may be, his loyalty to you and me remains unchanging.

'I am His Highness's Dog. Pray tell me sir, whose dog are you?'

Reading Texts

Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." ¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰ for 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. ²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²² When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." ²³ And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." ²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptist." ²⁵ Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.