

# Perfect Freedom ...

*... where is it to be found?*

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*A sermon given on the Seventh Sunday after Trinity, 14th July 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.*

*Mark 6:14-29*

When I was little, I used to think that if only I could be king, I would be able to do whatever I liked. Now that I'm a bit older, I realise things might not be quite that simple and with that acquired wisdom, I've been able to let go of that childhood ambition to be king. But I suppose what I thought when I was little was that kings are powerful, and if you're powerful, you're free - you can do whatever you like. What's more, you can make other people do what you want. And actually I suspect many people never quite grow out of that illusion: it is so easy to assume that if only we have power or authority, we can be free; if only we can get more money, or abolish those restrictive rules and regulations, or get rid of the unfair competition - then at last we shall be free. But in fact, true freedom has very little to do with being free from restrictions or being more powerful than others. And that's exactly what King Herod discovered in this morning's gospel reading.

As we look at this passage, there are three main characters: there's John the Baptist, the prophet; there is King Herod, who is a puppet ruler accountable in the end to the Romans; and there is his lover, Herodias, who is also Herod's sister-in-law - so that at several levels, this relationship is a bit scandalous. It's true that there is also Herodias' daughter (somewhat confusingly, also called Herodias in this passage, although Salome in other versions) who dances for the king at his birthday party. But in the end, she's just a cypher for her mother, a puppet of her mother - so I'm not counting her as a major character.

And of these three, John the Baptist, Herod and Herodias, which would you say was the most free?

Well, you might say it's obviously Herod. After all, he's the king: he has authority; he has courtiers and soldiers and servants to do his will. But in this story at least, Herod seems to be trapped and he comes across as a rather pitiful figure, forced in the end to do something he doesn't want to do. The text says that Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man. Herod knew better than anyone that his relationship with Herodias was scandalous and to have it publicly denounced by John made Herod afraid. John could turn public opinion against Herod and that might draw the unwelcome attention of the Romans, upon whom Herod was dependent. At the same time we are told Herod protected John, even though John spoke against him - perhaps he recognised the truth of what John was saying. And perhaps his sense that John was a righteous and holy man also made him afraid, afraid of God.

And Herod is tied to Herodias. He's divorced his own wife and fallen out with his brother because of Herodias - so the stakes are high for him. And when Herodias demands that he cut off the head of John the Baptist, Herod doesn't feel able to ignore it. Herod has made this stupid promise in front of his officials, in front of his important political guests, the leaders of Galilee. These were people he needed to keep on side for the sake of keeping the peace in his kingdom; he needed to be able to impress them with his power and generosity; he couldn't afford not to keep his promise.

So when the girl at her mother's bidding asks for the head of John the Baptist, Herod feels his hands are tied. He's not free at all.

So what about Herodias? How free is she? She doesn't have any official position, but she's married to one king and the mistress of another, so you might think she has an enormous power behind the scenes. She's a Lady Macbeth character, pulling the strings to get her feeble-minded man to do her will. And yet, how free is she, really? She's a woman playing a man's game for very high stakes; she's abandoned her husband, who is himself a king; it could easily be her head on that platter and not John the Baptist's; she's chosen to throw in her lot with Herod, and Herod is now all she's got - so she needs him to succeed. The last thing she needs is for Herod's position to be threatened by popular unrest stirred up by John the Baptist. So getting rid of John isn't just an act of malice - it's more likely to be the act of a frightened woman, a woman who feels she doesn't have many options, who is acting out of a sense of self protection. So maybe she's not as free as we thought she was.

And then there's John the Baptist. On the face of it, John is the least free character in this story: he's been arrested, bound and thrown in prison; John is a literal captive; he has no powerful friends to help; no money to bribe the guards; no prospect of freedom. And yet he speaks his mind without fear. He denounces Herod before he was put in prison and he continues to speak freely when Herod came to listen to him in captivity. There is a sense in which John enjoys the freedom of a true prophet, speaking the word of God because he feels compelled because there is something bigger than him at work in his life. He doesn't scheme; he doesn't intrigue; he doesn't manipulate; he speaks with sincerity out of his own integrity - and in that sense he is more free than anyone else in this story.

And the story is inserted rather clunkily into the narrative of Mark's Gospel, because Jesus's ministry is compared to that of John the Baptist: some people thought Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead; others were comparing Jesus to Elijah or one of the prophets of old, like Amos, who we heard about in the first reading, speaking out against the kings of Northern Israel; Jesus, like John, is acting and speaking with the freedom of God's prophets, not worrying about what people think, not fearful about the consequences. And although John comes to a bad end, beheaded in a dingy prison cell because of a rash promise made at a drunken birthday party, his fate is linked with talk of resurrection. I wonder if you can see the similarities: John expressed his freedom in faithfulness to God saying, 'Not my will, but thine be done'; John falls foul of those in power who feel threatened by his freedom; John's followers come and take his body and lay it in a tomb. In all kinds of ways, John prefigures Jesus not just with his words, but in the freedom of his life, the response of his disciples to his death, and in the rumours of resurrection - there is something of a pattern being established here.

So as we hear this story, it reminds us that true freedom is to be found not in the power of status or position; not in possessing great wealth or the power of the sword; not in being skilled in cutting deals and the art of persuasion - but in personal integrity and in a deep faith that God's ways will be vindicated. Both John and Jesus are free in the end because they're not afraid of dying, or at least they are confident that God is bigger than death.

So whatever you feel about your own freedom this morning; however limited you may feel your choices are; whatever pressures may be hemming you in - be reminded that the freedom promised by the world often turns out to be a false freedom, and that the truth which comes through faith in

Christ is the truth he promises will make us free, and that in the words of the old Collect, *'We put our faith in a God whose service is perfect freedom.'*

# Reading Text

## Mark 6:14-29

<sup>14</sup> 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.'<sup>15</sup> But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.'<sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'<sup>19</sup> And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not,<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.<sup>22</sup> 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.'<sup>23</sup> And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.'<sup>24</sup> She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.'<sup>25</sup> 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.'<sup>26</sup> The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.<sup>27</sup> Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,<sup>28</sup> brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.<sup>29</sup> When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.