

Homily for Sunday 11th July - Rev'd Carol Pharaoh

Introduction What readings we have today! The link between all of them you might say is the theme of power. That is, human power verses the real authority and power which flow from God when we are called by him.

In the Old Testament reading, Amos talks about a plumb line and points to God's standards of uprightness and criticises the corrupt power of his day. In the passage from Mark, we hear that whilst Jesus' reputation is growing his identity is still not clear. King Herod fears that Jesus is John raised from the dead and then we are told the dark tale of John's execution. The reading also poses the question as to why bad things happen to good people. This, is a very big and hard question to answer of course, and one that theologians have grappled with for centuries. Let's consider the gospel reading a little bit more today and see if we can find something to help us with all these big topics.

Herod We perhaps know the gruesome story well. Herod is unhappy about John's criticism of him and uses his power to throw him in prison. He could have killed him straight away but he's indecisive. Perhaps he wants to be thought of as a good king so he listens to John over a period of time. (We're told that he's fascinated by him, a bit in awe of him and he likes to listen to him.) Herodias, on the other hand, wants John dead and it all comes to a head (pardon the pun) on an occasion of drunkenness and lust. Herod makes a foolish oath and is cornered. In order not to lose face he gives Salome what she asks prompted by her mother Herodias.

We perhaps all know what it feels like to get cornered into doing the wrong thing. A group of people can sweep us along with their enthusiasm which can make it impossible for us to take a step back and cause us to take a course of action which we know in our hearts of hearts isn't right. We hope and pray that the consequences of us not wanting to lose face and going with the flow aren't as devastating as Herod's but Herod's cruel exercise of power has its parallels today. The cruel exercise of power frighteningly exists today in many areas in our world. It can be a sad and gruesome world and the response to evil in some cases, rather than provoking a response of peace and justice, has simply sadly created more evil.

Going against the flow John, on the other hand, doesn't go with the flow and is outspoken about the wrong Herod is doing. Others, no doubt, knew that Herod was doing wrong too, but John has the courage to stand up against him. He has God's plumb line in his heart.

Is our plumb line straight? Do we have the right standards? Decisions and consequences in life aren't all black and white yet have our attitudes become too liberal and are we

a bit too wishy washy in our thinking and attitudes? Life has changed quite radically in all kinds of ways. Communities aren't the same. Families aren't the same. We accept relationships last as long as they do without challenging a lack of commitment or a need to stick at and work at something. There's an attitude that says that it's alright to do as you please, but is it?

As Christians we often go along with things because to speak out against things would make us unpopular. Do we speak out against injustices in society? We might complain about politicians but do we do more than moan? Should we, as Christians, take responsibility for getting our voices heard more even if it means going against the flow?

John the Baptist is described in biblical terms as a prophet. Part of the meaning of the word 'prophecy' means to 'stand up in front and speak on behalf of'. Where are God's prophets today and what can we do to challenge those things which are not of God? Can we campaign to encourage our government, and people in power everywhere, to seek justice and peace?

Power Both the readings from Amos and Mark tell us of the hostility directed towards those who challenge Godless power. But there's also a clear message that God supports those who face up to the pretence and pretentiousness of power. Amos stands up to Amaziah. John's words are still having an effect on Herod, even after his death, as Herod is reduced to panic by the merest rumour of John the Baptist.

God calls us and can enable us with real authority and power to be speakers of the truth and empowerers of the voiceless. All we need is the courage to stand firm, assured by the fact that God's Spirit will be with us to inspire us and strengthen us to be people of integrity and truth.

The hard question So finally, to the big question of why bad things happen to good people. I too fail to find the words to answer this with any clarity and conviction. Yet, perhaps the most profound image of this is that of Jesus' hanging on a cross. Jesus knew pain, humiliation and cruelty at its extreme and this was something he definitely didn't deserve. While this doesn't make John's death or any other person's death at the hands of a corrupt and evil power right, it does assure me that God cares about us and what happens to us. Ultimately, we are in capable and safe hands.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen

(Ephesians 3:20-21).