

Dinner is Served!

a sermon preached on the

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday 12 July 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lection: Mark 6:14-29

The success of the 'how to' publishing industry illustrates our firm belief that we are capable of disciplining our minds and wills in order to accomplish whatever goals and objectives we decide for ourselves. And because of this we even approach faith in this way, imagining that if we do this, or think that then we can somehow stage-manage our spirituality also. And the truth is that, beyond a fundamental, and necessary, standard of moral discipline, faith cannot be so stage-managed. And the reason is that despite our culture's commitment to a self-constructed freedom and autonomy, actually, what we really need, in stark contrast to what we want, is in fact given to us. Jesus' hometown crowd are offered a gift, ¹ as we heard last Sunday, not because *they* thought it was a fine plan, let alone because they deserved it. The people of the villages to whom Jesus sends his disciples, likewise, are offered a gift. ² And in the episode following today's gospel fragment an entire multitude, a crowd of sheep without a shepherd in a deserted place, will be offered the gift of fish and bread. ³

So it is that in today's gospel King Herod is offered a gift, dinner on a plate! Yes, it goes without saying that today's gruesome story communicates something of the depravity and folly and abuse of power and all that goes with it. But this is so obvious as to need little spelling out. Furthermore, this is hardly news, for we can hear of such tragic misuse and evil any old day – and no doubt that was equally so in the first century equivalent of our news bulletins. No, there is nothing *new* about that, and certainly no good news! And yes, it also goes without saying that, in the context of the unfolding gospel narrative, John the Baptist's grisly death foreshadows Jesus' death. And this, likewise, is obvious, and not entirely news, for the evangelist has already told us, three chapters ago, that the religious leaders began to conspire with the political leaders how to destroy Jesus. ⁴

What makes today's story 'gospel', astonishing good news, is that for a person who by the readers' standard of judgement is deemed to be utterly and absolutely beyond redemption, a salvation dinner is served. For any reader of the gospel confronted by such a stark caricature of evil in the weak and villainous behaviour of Herod in this story reaches a unanimous verdict – guilty, and condemned! We all agree that for this outrageous deed Herod deserves lifetime detention, as a minimum, and possibly even execution.

But the *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangellion* is that for Herod dinner is served! In spite of himself, and in spite of what Herod deserves, by any reasonable standard, Herod is offered the one thing that he truly needs and the one thing that can save him – the head of John the Baptist! Now before you take fright and rush out of here imagining that a form of old-fashioned cannibalism is being advocated, just remember where we all are, and what lies at the heart of the Christian community - the sacrificial Table, the bread and wine, the Body of Christ. It's perfectly obvious that we are not in the business of literalism here, but in the realm of the symbolic. Herod, in spite of himself, is offered on a plate the one thing he needs to consume – “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” the voice who signals to “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me... I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit”. ⁵

¹ Mark 6:1-2

² Mark 6:7

³ Mark 6:35-44

⁴ Mark 3:6

⁵ Mark 1:4a, 7a, 8

This is what Herod most needs, for he is in the grip of those primitive and undeveloped aspects of himself which he neither sees nor understands, and which control him because he is unconscious of them. Herod can only be liberated from these unconscious powers by the penetrating voice from the wilderness, from the despised and unfathomable and feared place. Only that voice can wake him from his deep unconsciousness, because of which he is unable to stand up as a mature man. True, Herod *has* heard something, which has tantalised and perplexed him, since he knows that John is a righteous and holy man, and he liked to listen to him, and he protected him.⁶ But, in the grip of both the primitive feminine as well as the inflated masculine - in the guises of Herodias and her daughter⁷ and the courtiers and officers and leaders of Galilee - Herod succumbs to the grim pseudo-sacrifice which pacifies these undeveloped energies, instead of making the one true sacrifice that is necessary.

The gospel, we remember, is good news, and every part of the story is part of the good news. So it's reasonable to ask what is the good news in today's story. Perhaps it's that that even for someone we judge so terminally as this despicable Herod, a salvation dinner is served! Herodias' daughter may have taken the gruesome platter to her mother, but its shocking meal is actually the very meal Herod needs. Only by consuming the suffering Baptist can Herod be liberated from unconsciousness and its inevitably evil grip. This is the sacrifice Herod is called to make. Of course, there is much that could be said about Herodias and her daughter and the courtiers and officials in this regard, and their unconsciousness and the dark consequences and what good news is offered them, but that would make this sermon much too long! The good news that is for Herod, the principle focus of the story, will have to suffice today.

The story of Herod's unsought and shocking meal may then shed some light on our common experience - salvation is offered to us precisely in what is weak and vulnerable and despised, and possibly even callous and brutal in us, each of us. That which I most despise, which I most fear because it seems to threaten my sense of power and autonomy, and because it seems to put all my accomplishments at risk, that is the very salvation meal I am offered. Eating this salvation meal is the true sacrifice I am called to make. And I must hope and pray that I will have the courage to eat the salvation that is offered, the meal which I did not earn, nor seek, but which will save my life, and, mysteriously, the life of others.

This kind of talk ought not surprise us, for as I reminded us earlier, at the centre of Christian faith lies a salvation meal consisting of what is despised, scandalous, shameful and rejected - the Body of Christ. And all of us are offered this incredible meal consisting of what is most despised and shameful and scandalous in us, each of us. And our sacrifice is to consume what is most despised, that we may become the Body of Christ. And the shocking and astonishing good news is that this very meal, outrageous though it may seem to rational consciousness, is the very meal of life, the salvation food - dinner is served!

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

⁶ Mark 6:19b,20

⁷ The Markan text names both mother and daughter 'Herodias' (Mark 6:17,22). Matthew removes the ambiguity by referring to 'the daughter of Herodias' (Matthew 14:6). Christian mythology has given her the name 'Salome', but this is not supported by the Biblical text.