

THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST ... (Mk. 6:14-29)

Out of all the nations of the world the people of Israel have been the most privileged of God. To them was given the Scriptures, the Covenants, they were chosen by God to be His people, to them were sent the prophets, to them the Gospel was first preached, it was members of their nation who God used to write the Old and the New Testaments, It was to them the Messiah was sent. Beyond any discussion, they have been the most privileged people ... and they continue to be privileged for God has yet much more to grant them, - we believe, - in His plan for the ages.

Great nations are formed out of great men and great women. The greatest man the nation of Israel produced, - second only to Jesus, - was John the Baptist. Jesus said of him, **Mt. 11:11** *Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.* ... John the Baptist was the *last* of the Old Testament prophets, for Jesus said, **Lk. 16:16** *The law and the prophets were until John.* ... At the end of the prophecy of Malachi in our Authorised Versions, it has been inserted from an outside source, "The End of the Prophets". That is incorrect since, - on the authority of Jesus, - the end of the prophets came with John the Baptist, some four hundred years *after* Malachi.

Now, in Mk. 6:14-29 we have a whole section that is not about Jesus ... but about His cousin John the Baptist. He has been in prison since first mentioned in Mk. 1:14, *Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God* (cf. Mt. 4:12). ... He had been imprisoned soon after the temptation and baptism of Jesus, - about more than a year or so earlier, - for speaking out against something Herod did. During his imprisonment some of his disciples had visited him, and the news sifted through to Jesus (Lk. 7:18).

There were rumblings throughout the country because of Jesus, - **14** *And king Herod heard of him; (for his name was spread abroad).* King Herod was hearing about the miracles Jesus was doing, - he hadn't actually seen them himself, and neither had he met Jesus. He has also heard about the exploits of the twelve disciples He had sent out ... and it was making the king uncomfortable! He feared a potential 'rebellion' or 'revolution.

Herod lived a very comfortable lifestyle in Tiberias. Tiberias was and is a city on the western coast of the Sea of Galilee. During the time of Herod, though, no decent Jew, - including Jesus, - would enter that city because Herod had built it on top of a cemetery. It was, therefore, desecrated soil, and they would not put a foot on it! ... So, Herod was in his lap of luxury in the palace of Tiberias, and

Jesus and the disciples were ‘out there’ in Galilee ... away from Herod, but he heard about it, and he panicked, **14** ... and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him. ... That was one explanation ... **15** Others said, That it is Elias. ... Could it possibly be what the prophecy of Malachi was referring to? (**Mal. 4:5** Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD) ... And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets. ... These were worrying times for Herod! Luke wrote, **Lk. 9:7** Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done by him: and he was perplexed, because that it was said of some, that John was risen from the dead; **8** And of some, that Elias had appeared; and of others, that one of the old prophets was risen again. **9** And Herod said, John have I beheaded: but who is this, of whom I hear such things? ... And they feared Jesus was a resurrected John the Baptist coming to wreak revenge!

By the way, who was Herod? He was a ‘tetrarch’, **Lk. 3:1** Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee. A ‘tetrarch’ was a ruler of a fourth of a region. Herod had been given this position by the Romans so therefore, he was ruling on behalf of the invading force ... and by being in such a position he was despised by the Jews. His power was restricted for he was only allowed to permit what was in his Roman master’s interest. ...

He came from a *bad* family. Herod’s father was Herod the Great (Herod Agrippa) ... He had ten wives, and there were many ‘little’ ‘Herods’. Technically, he wasn’t a Jew, but a descendant of Esau, an Edomite/Idumean, and this meant he was outside the covenant God had made with Jacob. ... It was Herod the Great who tried to kill the baby Jesus.

Now, it is his son Herod Antipas who we read about here in Mk. 6, - altogether he reigned for forty-two years. He was a true ‘chip of the old block’ for he was a thoroughly evil nasty man, and his family were involved in every type of wickedness ... to as far away as Rome! It is so well documented in ancient history, - you can find out about it yourself for it would take up far too much of our time ... and besides, we don’t want to talk about him any more than we need to!

Anyway, he heard about Jesus (v.14) ... and he kept on hearing *more* about Him (v.16) ... and the more he heard, the more unsettled he was, and he was scared, **16** It is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead. ... It’s John the Baptist, - in the form of Jesus, - coming back to get me! ... Through the Pharisees he had heard what Jesus called him, ... Jesus called him ‘a fox’, **32** And he said unto them

[*the Pharisees*], Go ye, and tell that fox ... By the way, Herod's name means 'heroic' ...

And then Mark proceeds to tell us about what Herod had done to John the Baptist, - he had first of all imprisoned him, and then cut the head off him! ... The Romans had nothing to do with it, or the Pharisees, or anyone else for it was all Herod's doing.

The reason he did it was personal, - not political, nor in defence of his region ... but *personal*. One of Herod's brothers was Philip and he was married to Herodias, - Mark describes it, ¹⁷ *his brother Philip's wife*. However, it is not how *Herod* saw it because as far as *he* was concerned she was *his* wife, *for he had married her*. She was his brother's wife, - his sister-in-law, - and he stole her ... but she was still legally his brother's wife. Indeed, there's a whole story of intrigue surrounding this relationship, - much of it doused in incest and expulsion and disinheritance of some family members. The family simply couldn't get on together ... and it was made all the worse by this relationship, - such as it was, - with Herod and Herodias.

And then along came John the Baptist, and he told Herod what no-one else dared tell him, ¹⁸ *For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife*. ... He didn't advise him to think about it ... but he outrightly told him it was wrong! ... Not the wisest thing to say, under the circumstances, but it needed saying! Doubtless, John would have preached about it ... Herod should not have been with Herodias because she was still Philip's wife ... and it was not only adulterous, it was also incestuous, according to Lev. 18:16 and 20:21, *And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing!* ... In other words, no matter how lavish and opulent his lifestyle ... Herod was *unclean*, filthy, dirty, and defiled.

And you could imagine Herod hearing this and going into a rage and having John arrested and brought before him and saying to him, What's this I hear you are saying?" ... John would have had no hesitation to tell him, *It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife*. ... He was a powerful preacher in the wilderness, and I'm sure he was equally a powerful preacher in the king's palace!

Herodias was really angry though, - she was 'spitting fire', as we say, ¹⁹ ... *Herodias ... would have killed him; but she could not ... Why not? ... Because her husband was trying to restrain her for he was afraid of John, ²⁰ For Herod feared [stood in awe of] John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly [i.e. he couldn't deny*

anything John was saying]. ... As far as Herod was concerned, “Put him in jail and throw away the key, but there’s no need to kill him!”

So Herod did not want to kill John the Baptist ... and that was because he genuinely feared him. And then Herod’s fear develops into his folly, and his folly came to its height at a birthday banquet he arranged for himself. These occasions were *rife* with all sorts of debauchery ... and everyone knew what type of activity went on. Herod invited along all the local dignitaries, - the lords/nobles/governors of the neighbouring territories, the military commanders, and all the powerful men in society. ... This was one mighty cesspool of iniquity! And of course, it included a religious representation of influential people who came to be known as ‘the Herodians’. ... Back in Mk. 3:6 we see the Herodians and the Pharisees were all mixed in amongst each other, - you couldn’t tell them apart, *And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him.* ... So, they are a bad and wicked lot!

So, at this birthday banquet were the Romans and the Jewish high officials, - those who had forged alliances and were co-operating with the Romans ... *and Herodias saw her ‘chance’!* ... “They’re drunk, they’re drunk, those silly old fools” ... and Herodias sent in her daughter, - half-naked, - leaving very little to the imagination, - to seduce them, ²² *And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel [κοράσιον,... Let’s get the meaning of this word into context. In Mk. 5:22, And, behold, there cometh one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name; and when he saw him, he fell at his feet, ²³ And besought him greatly, saying, My little daughter (θυγάτριον) lieth at the point of death: I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be healed; and she shall live. ... ³⁵ While he yet spake, there came from the ruler of the synagogue’s house certain which said, Thy daughter (θυγάτριον) is dead: why troublest thou the Master any further? ³⁶ As soon as Jesus heard the word that was spoken, he saith unto the ruler of the synagogue, Be not afraid, only believe ... ³⁸ And he cometh to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and seeth the tumult, and them that wept and wailed greatly ... ⁴⁰ ... But when he had put them all out, he taketh the father and the mother of the damsel (παιδίον), and them that were with him, and entereth in where the damsel (παιδίον) was lying. ⁴¹ And he took the damsel (παιδίον) by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel (κοράσιον), I say unto thee, arise. ⁴² And straightway the damsel (κοράσιον) arose, and walked; for she was of the age of twelve years.*

So let’s return to Mk. 6:22 where Herod has all the perverted and corrupt deviants of the day, - drunken and in the party mood, - and at the suggestion of this vile Herodias he brings out this little girl (κοράσιον) to perform for all those men, ²² *And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and*

them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. ... *What a stupid man!* ... He was stupid before he got the drink in him ... but he was far worse when he was *full!*

Herodias' daughter, - sadly, probably with the morals of her mother, - *loved it!* ... They all loved it! Her whole family, - far and near, - loved it! In fact, the Caesar of the day was Tiberius Caesar ... and he was well-known for being a paedophile, and his behaviour was highly received and imitated throughout the empire! ... *This was some party!* ... But Herod and his family weren't ashamed, - *they loved it!*

So this young girl is dancing in front of all these leering filthy men ... and Herod makes her an offer, ²² ... the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. ... Absolutely no shame! ... And he went even further, ²³ he swore unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. ... He was a fool to start with ... but the drink made him ridiculous!

So she slithered back to her mother, "Mummy, what shall I say?" ²⁴ What shall I ask?... 'Mummy' knew exactly what to ask for! She hadn't to think twice, And she said, The head of John the Baptist. ... It is *good* when God's enemy is your enemy! ... ²⁵ And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist. ... That was the measure of this young girl! That is how corrupt she was, even at such an early age! ... Of all the things Herod could have given to the girl ... and she asks for the one thing he did not want to do!

Sin is devious. It was devious in the Garden of Eden, and it has never stopped being devious. It sets its mind on what it wants, and it won't stop until it gets it ... and that is why God's people ought not to play about with sin. It's shrewd, sneaky, underhand ... and it creeps up on you when you are 'off-guard'. ... The young girl, - and her mother, - knew exactly what they wanted ... the head of John the Baptist on a plate! ... ²⁶ And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. ²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸ And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother. ... What absolute wickedness! ... Once again, though, it was the kind of thing the Romans did. For example, Fulvia was the wife of Mark Antony. ... She 'pulled a similar trick' as Herodias when she asked for the head of Cicero, - the Roman philosopher, - to be brought on a plate (... maybe that is where Herodias got the idea) ... Here is how Cicero was dealt with. He was arrested, imprisoned, and as they were preparing to execute him his

last words are said to have been, "There is nothing proper about what you are doing, soldier, but do try to kill me properly." He bowed to his captors, leaning his head out of the litter in a gladiatorial gesture to ease the task. By baring his neck and throat to the soldiers, he was indicating that he wouldn't resist. According to Plutarch, Herennius first slew him, then cut off his head. On Antony's instructions his hands, which had penned the Philippics (a condemnatory speech) against Antony, were cut off as well; these were nailed along with his head on the Rostra in the Forum Romanum according to the tradition of Marius and Sulla, both of whom had displayed the heads of their enemies in the Forum. ... And Mark Antony's wife Fulvia took Cicero's head, pulled out his tongue, and jabbed it repeatedly with her hairpin in final revenge against Cicero's power of speech. ... And that is how bad Herod and his family were too! They did the same kind of thing as their Roman masters!

So, after being in prison for a year or more, John was put to death. His work was done though. God's will had been achieved through his faithful service, - God kept him until his earthly work was completed, - and the Lord Jesus so highly commended him, [Mt. 11:11](#) Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist. Luke recorded it too, [28](#) For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist.

And so an evil man and his family ... and all those at the birthday ... had killed the last and the best of the prophets ... an even better man than Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Daniel, and all the rest. ... Then, [29](#) And when his disciples heard of it, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb. Matthew gives us a little more detail, [Mt. 14:12](#) And his disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus.

It is a very sad account of the death of a great man of God. It has been replicated in this country of Scotland, and in many nations across the globe ... even until today. It's difficult some times to understand what God has in such a plan ... but he does have ... and God used an ordinary man like John the Baptist in a very particular way during those times. John the Baptist was the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy, [Is. 40:1](#) Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. [2](#) Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins. [3](#) The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

... That is referring to John the Baptist ... over six hundred years earlier for that was his message, **Mk. 1:2** As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. **3** The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. God makes no mistakes, and He allows nothing to interfere with His plans ... And even though it might sometimes look and feel as if the future of the Church is in jeopardy, it is far from it. John had a purpose given to him to fulfil, and he fulfilled it faithfully and sacrificially... and then the Lord took him.

Herod could not do anymore to John than what God allowed him to do ... and here is a wonderful truth ... and we shall conclude our study today by going back to the prophecy of Isaiah. In chapter forty the Gospels explain to us how John is the one who **3** ... crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God ... and here is how his message is followed up, **4** Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: **5** And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

... There is victory! ... We are on the winning side, and we know for certain how the proceedings will be brought to their conclusion ... and here is the further confidence in which our future is assured, **8** The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

Just as Jesus did not die for nothing, neither did John the Baptist, and neither has any child of God died in vain for their Saviour! Isaiah also prophesied in chapter twenty-five, **Is. 25:8** He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. **9** And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation. **10** For in this mountain shall the hand of the LORD rest.

... John the Baptist didn't need the head he had while here on earth because he has been given a new body ... with a new head ... And Herod, - through his wicked act, - only confirmed the power and the promises of God.

Today, the voice of Herod is silent, but through a passage such as this in the Gospel of Mark, the message of the faithfulness of John the Baptist, - even in his death, - continues to live on and speak to you and me today. May we take account of God's holy and infallible Word as He lays it upon each of our hearts! Amen.