

Herod Antipas

12 7 15

Merciful God

you have prepared for those who love you
such good things as pass our understanding:
pour into our hearts such love towards you
that we, loving you in all things and above all things,
may obtain your promises,
which exceed all we can desire.

Our text may be found in today's reading from Mark (6 v16)

'But when Herod heard of it, he said,
'John whom I beheaded has been raised.'

Three weeks ago, the disciples, frightened at night on the Sea of Galilee, asked this question of Jesus their teacher, when he had stilled the storm; 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

Two weeks ago, we heard about Jairus and the woman whom Jesus healed of a continual flow of blood, that both had confidence in the fact that Jesus was a healer who had the power to perform miraculous cures.

Last week, we heard how, back in Nazareth, Jesus' neighbours had dismissed him as a teacher with an authority that they could respect and accept because they'd

known him as a boy, seen him grow up among them; they knew his mother and his late father; they knew his brothers and his sisters; and they could remember the fact that he'd worked with his dad as a carpenter in the family workshop.

Today, the question who Jesus is has moved on to the court of Herod Antipas. Herod has had John the Baptist beheaded. In a society where those in charge could do what they pleased; a society where human rights were not enshrined in law, a king could – while in power – get away with pretty much anything he liked like, executing people who annoyed him – sounds a bit like North Korea or perhaps ISIS.

Now news of Jesus the teacher, prophet and performer of miracle healings had reached the court of Herod where people were divided as to whom Jesus was. Let me quote the opening of today's gospel in full of which our text is the final sentence. '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.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John whom I beheaded has been raised.'

We need to remember this is an age before the internet, social media, radio and TV. No mobile phones so news spread through word of mouth, through gossip. And Jesus was hot news with the healings and miraculous cures, rumours he'd stilled a storm at sea, that he taught with authority. But the question remained – just who is he, this carpenter, this carpenter's son from Nazareth ?

Fact is this time was a time that folk were expecting the coming of the Messiah. When John the Baptist had first appeared on the scene, he was questioned by the authorities about whom exactly he was and John had replied that he was not the Messiah but one who had come to prepare the way for him.

Now, here is Jesus going around Galilee, teaching and healing after John has been removed forcibly from the scene. Here what is worth noting in what the people at court are saying. Three options: Elijah; a prophet or John raised from the dead. Herod opts for the latter. Each view is a reflection of the times when something odd from God is anticipated. But sadly each is wrong: Jesus is the Son of God, our Saviour.

So Salome may dance before Herod and his court and Herod may promise her anything she asks – up to half his kingdom – and the girl is sad enough to ask for the head of John the Baptist rather than for something more useful. But the question Mark continually is asking us, the reader, is ‘Just who exactly is this Jesus of whom he writes?’ And the answer I trust we know already.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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