

Sermon on the Death of John the Baptist delivered on July 12, 2009 at the Episcopal Church of Our Saviour, Cincinnati by the Rev. William G. Gartig

This morning's Gospel is an interesting and a unique one in the Bible that poses unique challenges to the preacher, and, for that matter, for the reader or hearer. While at first glance the story may seem to be irrelevant (Jesus isn't mentioned even once in it, and there is nothing particularly Christian about it.), upon further reflection we can see its importance.

Today's story of the death of John the Baptist may not look particularly important first of all because it is something of an aside, a parenthesis, a footnote, in the Gospel narrative, giving us some background about John the Baptist, in case we didn't know about him. The story gives us the reason why Herod Antipas would with a guilty conscience think that Jesus was John the Baptist come back from the dead to get revenge.

Herod knew that John had been a good man, even a holy

man, and that he had not been found guilty of a capital offense. Yet he (Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great) had ordered his execution. It didn't matter that he was forced to sign off on John's execution by circumstances and the need to maintain his credibility with his peers.

Politically, Herod Antipas' hands were tied. He had made a promise in public at that party, and if he reneged on his promise, he would look weak. And a leader can never afford to look weak or indecisive or unsure of himself. That would "send the wrong message." Once a leader has decided on something, he should not have any second thoughts or doubts about his decision, but should "stay the course" and carry his decision through to the end, no matter what the consequences.

This is what Herod Antipas did in regard to John, but now he was feeling guilty for John's execution, haunted by what he

had done. His guilty conscience led him to think that Jesus, so similar to John in some ways, was come to punish him his sins. Herod should be a reminder to us that while we may get away with doing wrong sometimes, we can never get away from ourselves and the knowledge of what we have done.

The story of the death of John the Baptist is at once exotic and all-too-familiar.

We all know the story from the Hollywood movies. What we call “biblical epics” about Jesus seem to always include this scene at Herod Antipas’ banquet, because it gives movie directors an opportunity to depict an oriental despot’s court with scantily-clad young women serving food to gentlemen lounging on cushions as they watch the slender young Salome doing the Dance of the Seven Veils in the middle of the room for their titillation. And then there is the gory moment when

we (and a shocked Herod Antipas) are shown the freshly severed head of John the Baptist dripping blood on a silver platter. This is great stuff, and just the sort of visually interesting, exotic thing audiences like to see. So the story is perhaps one of the best-known scenes from the New Testament and quite familiar to us.

But there is another way in which the story of the Death of John the Baptist is familiar, all-too-familiar, to us.

John the Baptist was an extraordinary person, no doubt, but what happened to him was not unique. First, both literarily in the context of Mark’s gospel and theologically, John’s death foreshadows Jesus’ death. Even down to some details there are parallels, like the death sentence being given unwillingly under pressure from others (in this case Herod Antipas, in Jesus’ by Pilate). But the main similarity is that in both cases, an innocent man, even a good and holy man

sent from God, had a death sentence carried out against him by a government that felt threatened by his preaching and his example.

So John was Jesus' forerunner in his preaching (because he also preached the coming Kingdom of God before Jesus began to preach it) and also, in turned out, in his passion. Later on the Gospel of Mark Jesus says of John, "I tell you that Elijah [that is, John] has come, they did to him whatever they pleased" [9:13]. They would later do to Jesus whatever they pleased too.

You may at this point say, but the Roman government was very much in Jesus' case seeking to provide justice and maintain law and order. They sincerely believed Jesus was a terrorist or at least a religious figure whose preaching inspired others to acts of violence. It was the same with John the Baptist: the authorities considered him a dangerous religious fanatic whose impassioned

sermons in which he criticized the government were likely to motivate impressionable young Jewish men to become home-grown terrorists. So, yes, the government's intentions were good: to protect the nation from violent extremists.

Unfortunately, in Jesus' case the government arrested an innocent man and a religious leader who did not advocate violence. That didn't matter though. Once the criminal justice system gets a hold of you, it almost never lets you go. The assumption is that if you have been arrested, you are guilty. John and Jesus both ran afoul of the system and were crushed by it. Sometimes if you get caught up in the system, it will chew you up and spit you out.

Beyond the similarities between John and Jesus even in their deaths, the death of John the Baptist is far-from-unique and all-too-familiar because what happened to John happens

far-too-often. Down through human history far too many people who, like John, were innocent, have been wrongfully imprisoned or even executed. Sometimes it is an extra-judicial killing, like the KKK has often done in our country and right-wing death squads have done in Argentina and many other countries. Other times the execution was a legal one done by the State. But whether in or outside the Law, an ethnic minority or a movement of one sort or another has been seen as a threat to society as a whole or to the people in power, and people have felt justified, nay, compelled, for good of the nation, to get rid of these “enemies of the people,” or whatever we are calling them these days.

Sometimes people that the authorities see as trouble-makers and set themselves to oppose are really no threat in the sense that they advocate the use of violence, because they don't.

And yet they can represent a threat to the way things have always been done. They can be a threat to the status quo. The Civil Rights Movement of the 50's and 60's was one such peaceful movement that was very scary to White Americans, some of whom fought it even with violence and murder. The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa is in many ways a parallel movement that scared most White South Africans and was opposed by the government as evil. Those today who work for immigrants' rights and those who work for economic justice and the fair treatment of workers are seen by many people as dangerous trouble-makers. It is the same with people who try to fight bigotry and discrimination. Many people would like to “lock them up and throw away the key.” So it is everywhere still at least somewhat dangerous to work for good but unpopular causes, and in some places you can end

up under arrest. So the story of John's last days and Passion story of our Lord remain relevant. They resonate with what goes on today. They are not unique events way back in history or in some other reality. Unfortunately.

Because John's wrongful arrest and execution and Jesus' too is repeated in every generation and in many places around the world, we should be able to relate to this morning's Gospel very well and to see it as connected very much to life today.

We Christians should of all people be the most concerned with how people are treated by the criminal justice system. We should be the greatest champions of the rights of the incarcerated and the most upset by police mistreatment of prisoners and prosecutorial misconduct by District Attorney's offices. We should more than most people identify with those who are incarcerated and see things from their perspective.

After all, perhaps unique among all the religions of the world, our religion was founded by a man who was wrongly convicted and wrongly executed.

Sometimes doing what is right will get you in trouble with the authorities and the power structure. Just be sure that your motives are noble and your methods also noble and just. 1 Peter [4:15-16] says, "Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker; yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God."

We wish it were otherwise, but God does not promise us success. We may end up casualties, brought down by the forces of darkness like John and Jesus after him, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King and Yitzhak Rabin. But if we fall, others will carry on the fight for justice and human dignity. And we will have lived our lives well, in the Name of God. *AMEN.*