

Newsletter Reflections for August

A lectionary reading for July from the gospel of Mark narrates the details of the death of John the Baptist. Although the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist at Herod's hands are mentioned in Matthew and Luke as well as in Mark, Mark's treatment of the event is quite different. In a gospel account noted mostly for its brevity, Mark narrates a much more detailed account of the circumstances of John the Baptist's death. Mark contains no birth narrative for Jesus, Jesus' baptism and temptation in the desert are given in five verses and in the oldest documents, Mark does not even give us a resurrection appearance story—we are left with frightened women telling no one about the empty cave or the message given for the disciples. As I was reading commentaries about this passage, this deviation of Mark's normal pattern was pointed out in the article published in Outlook Magazine. Like Rev. Duffield, we might want to consider what makes the author of this compact recording of Jesus' life and ministry suddenly become so expansively detailed that sixteen verses are devoted to this gruesome story. What about this event is so important in Mark's mind that he presents it this way because the only one who might be considered to be following a righteous path is the one whose head ends up on a platter? Some have described this as a morality tale about power and the abuse of power. That is certainly an element of the events described: Herod was known for his cruelty and abuse of power in order to maintain his claim to the throne. Yet although Matthew and Luke both also find it important to mention John's death at Herod's hands, their presentation of the information seems more like a Markan passage than does Mark's treatment of the event. Mark is believed to be the oldest of the written accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. Usually Matthew and Luke include much of what is found in Mark with additional details. What was it about John's death in this vicious manner that made Mark want to convey these details? Although the writer of this Gospel does not spare the disturbing details, the overall tenor of the narrative does not indicate that Mark relished horror for horror's sake. One obvious implication and interpretation is that this is a foreshadowing event. This death foreshadows the crucifixion of Jesus for much the same reasons: the challenge to the authority of those in power. Mark also presents Herod's interaction with John the Baptist differently. Herod is somewhat fascinated by who John is, and seems to regret his unwise promise which leads to the beheading. He has imprisoned John for his criticism and wants him silenced, but does not himself seek the end of John's life. According to this account, even if Herod is fascinated by the word proclaimed, intrigued by the deeds of power, sympathetic to the message and willing to admit the just and holy nature of the speaker, still loyalty to status and the need to keep the power he possesses leads to the death of God's messenger and eventually to the death of God's son. In Mark's view, divine work had deadly consequences. Mark recounts real ramifications for standing up to evil. Mark positions this account of the death of John the Baptist between Jesus' first sending out of the twelve to carry the gospel message and their return. Perhaps, this is meant to serve as an object lesson for those who speak God's word to those for whom the truth is

convicting and less than lifestyle affirming. Speaking the truth of God's desire for righteousness and justice to power has always been a risky business. This is an ugly story, but sometimes we need to consider and examine where we and our lifestyles and choices place us. Does there exist in our world today a parallel to this story? Are their voices raised which the powerful are trying to silence? Do we also want them silenced because their voices make us cringe and seem like judgments against our choices? Mark's message for the twelve and all disciples who follow after them is a daunting one. Those who wish to save their lives will lose them. The message Jesus brought, Mark says, demands our life, all that we are. We are called to speak God's word of truth; speaking God's word has real life consequences. The movement which Jesus began could not be stopped. Though the execution of God's messengers occurred, the message is still present and moving in this world. As I reflect on this passage and its message, it seems that it tells us that we, as Jesus' disciples, are not meant to be silent even if speaking does not win us popularity or status. As easily seen, this text is ugly; but ignoring ugliness is not a faithful witness to the gospel message or our call to be disciples of Jesus when radical challenges to status quo power is still required by the gospel message .

Shalom,

Pastor Libby