

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 07/14/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, July 14th

Mark 6:14-29

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Will your head be on a platter?

Sandwiched between the sending out of the twelve and their return, this week's Gospel lection is Mark's detailed account of the execution of John the Baptist, a figure intimately connected with Jesus' ministry. Mark's Gospel only diverts attention away from Jesus in two places and on both these occasions the focus is John. The first instance is in the beginning of the Gospel where John announces the arrival of Jesus (1:1-8). The second time is in this text where the death of John foreshadows the death of Jesus. The reader is left without any doubt that being a disciple is likely to place you in confrontation with worldly powers and this is likely to get you killed. This biblical message seems to be in complete contrast to the watered-down versions of Christianity marketed in our culture of a Jesus who can make your life better and make you better at life. This is not the Jesus who calls you to new life. In the biblical view, a disciple follows Jesus at all costs. In Christian consumerism, Jesus follows you.

Mark 6:14-29 Commentary

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

Verse 14 follows immediately from section of text describing Jesus sending out the twelve (vv.1-13). The faithfulness to mission and the dealing with rejection by the twelve apostles produce fruit. Herod learns of Jesus. There was speculation about the identity of Jesus. Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead.

¹⁷ For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

These verses include some additional background to why John the Baptist was arrested. In v.20, Herod is described as protecting John the Baptist from his wife who desired to put John to death. The text also states how Herod was perplexed by John's preaching but gladly listened to him. He may have listened but he failed to act!

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." ²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom."

The word rendered as girl in v.22 to describe Herodias' daughter is *korasion*. The only other place Mark uses this word is in connection to Jairus' daughter who was twelve years old (5:41,42).

²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." ²⁵ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. ²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison ²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

In this account, Herodias is the primary agent of John's death. Her daughter appears to be a pawn. The text also suggests Herod acted against his own convictions. He was ultimately more concerned by what others thought.

Reflections and Application

Mark's Gospel begins with John the Baptist. Jesus' ministry begins when John is arrested. John's death is a foreshadowing of Jesus death. There appears to be a connection between Herodias' daughter and Jairus' daughter (5:21-43). One is raised from the dead by Jesus, one requests the death of John the Baptist. The faith and the confession of the unnamed woman (5:21-43) is contrasted with the entrenched animosity of Herodias. She wanted John dead. Sin makes us irrational (James 4:1-2). Even Herod's reluctance in his role in John's death has similarities with Pilate's role in the death of Jesus. John lost his head so that Herod would not lose face. Jesus had to die to keep the peace. John dies an inglorious death at the bequest of a girl and Jesus also suffers from a shameful death. Mark is being clear to his readers of the opposition of what Jesus' disciples can expect. Perhaps this alludes to Jesus' warning later in the Gospel: *"But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them"* (13:9).

In the lectionary text we learn how John's integrity gets him into trouble. He was not executed for going along with the status quo. He was not executed for compromising his faith. He was faithful to his calling – He called Herod to repent! Unlike Herod and Pilate, John's conscience was clear. What John did in life had lasting meaning. This contrasts with the others in the story who only lived for themselves. Look at the destructive power such a life inevitably causes.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, "It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."¹ It is not easy being a Christian. We live in a broken world that encourages us to indulge our own desires, to strive to be relevant, and to fear being labeled. In some cases, we have even watered down the Gospel to better fit our own desires and our need for acceptance. Ultimately, the question we must ask is this: What stand am I taking as a Christian that challenges systemic brokenness and injustice that is likely to cause my head to end up on a platter (metaphorical or otherwise)?

For feedback or to be added or removed from the mailing list, please e-mail david.r.lyons@gmail.com

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "The Unfinished Temple," in *What's Wrong with the World, Collected Works* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 4:61.