

A royal birthday

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[0 : 00] Imagine if you'd been invited to the Queen's birthday party at Windsor on Thursday evening.

Now that was a private affair, and so we can only imagine what form it took. I wonder if, picking up on what Cassie was saying to the children, if the Queen blew out 90 candles as she gathered with her immediate family.

Did the Royals play charades or Monopoly? I wonder what it's like playing Monopoly where you can say, well, I actually do own that street. But anyway, I don't know what form that party might have taken.

But whatever form it took, I can be pretty sure it was a pleasant and dignified occasion, given whose birthday it was.

And we can be thankful that that is so. How different, how very different to the royal birthday party that Mark describes in the passage that we read.

[1 : 17] It was a debauched and gruesome affair. A party that culminated in the brutal execution of a righteous man.

I wonder, as we were reading the passage, were you disgusted by what we read? I sometimes think that our familiarity with the account can desensitize us.

It even sanitizes that which ought to repulse and disgust. In these past year or two, we've been reminded, very sadly, of the gruesomeness of decapitation.

We've seen the videos, the Islamic State. And even though the media have generally spared us the actual moment of execution, the image that we were able to see was enough to provoke, I'm sure, in many of us, in all of us, a sense of utter revulsion.

But I wonder how it was with you, as video followed video, if the impact waned. Of course, that's the reason why each video had to be more gruesome than the one before to maintain the level of impact.

[2 : 47] But leaving aside the atrocities of the Islamic State, what about Herod and John the Baptist? Has familiarity robbed the account of its power to repulse?

And what if it has? Why spend any time considering such a gruesome incident? There must be surely some nice stories in the Bible we could better occupy our time considering.

But we can't skip this passage. This is the passage before us as we make our way through Mark's Gospel. And this is the Word of God.

And it is a Word for us, and it is a Word for today. And this morning I want to think about Herod. Herod Antipas. One of the sons of Herod the Great.

Herod who was on the throne when Jesus was born. A very gruesome and dysfunctional family that I won't horrify you with all the details about.

[3 : 52] You may be familiar with some of them. I want to think about Herod. And to a lesser extent, think about Herodias, his wife. And Herodias' daughter, the stepdaughter of Herod.

Although the Bible doesn't give us her name, she's generally known as Salome. Other sources identify her with that name. And I want to think about Herod, and as I say to a lesser extent, those other two characters, from the perspective of their relationship with God.

And when we see what they do, you might think, well, do they have any relationship with God, these wicked people? Well, they do. And we want to consider the nature of that relationship with God, of Herod in particular, but also of Herodias and Salome.

In particular, we want to think about three aspects of that relationship. First of all, to identify and recognize how Herod was accountable to God, and how that plays out, or how that is illustrated in this account.

Accountable to God. But then also, in rebellion against God. And then finally, to consider Herod as one judged by God.

[5 : 10] So these three aspects of the relationship. First of all then, let's consider Herod as a man accountable to God.

We want to think about this in particular as we notice what John the Baptist does. There in verses 17 and 18, the very reason why he is arrested and then subsequently executed.

Certainly the reason for his arrest. And indirectly also for his execution. I say indirectly, not really indirectly. It's all directly for his execution as well.

Now, verses 17 and 18 remind ourselves of what it was that John had done that had carried such disfavor with Herod and Herodias. We read there, Then we're told why.

He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. He was a half-brother of Herod Antipas. Herod the Great had ten wives that we know of and countless children, many of whom he killed himself.

[6 : 21] This was one of the surviving sons, a half-brother of Herod. And John had, as we read there in verse 18, John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.

John called Herod to account. John the Baptist, a man who lived in the desert eating locusts, had the audacity to call to account the king of the land.

The title king really is somewhat generous. I don't know if it was a self-appointed title. Herod was a tetrarch. He was the governor of a quarter of Palestine.

Herod the Great had divided the kingdom in four, for four of his sons. And Herod Antipas got the short straw. He got Galilee. But nonetheless, given his pompous nature, he knew himself as, or liked to be considered as King Herod.

And John the Baptist was calling to account the king. What do we make of what John the Baptist did? We might call it courageous.

[7 : 34] Or we might say, rather, that it was very foolish. We might describe it as unhelpfully confrontational. He's just looking for trouble.

Calling to account the king. Yes, it's true what he's saying, but really, is it wise to do so? But perhaps the most damning condemnation, if condemnation it is, would be to describe John the Baptist's action as futile.

What was the point? Here, John the Baptist was putting his neck on the line, as subsequent events would prove, quite literally. And not only his neck, but the neck of his followers.

They too would be subject to opposition and possible violence because of John the Baptist calling to account King Herod.

And seemingly, there was nothing to be gained by what he was doing. Well, that's what John does. But our interest in particular is to think about what John's actions reveal.

[8 : 47] I think the first thing that it reveals, and this is really what we're honing in on at this point, is that it reveals Herod's accountability to God.

John was a prophet, and he spoke with God's authority. And John knew that even the king of the land, for all his pomp and all his glory and all his wealth and all his power and all his authority, he was accountable to God.

And that he was bound to keep God's law. And notice that Herod wasn't even a Jew. And he, as a Gentile, might well have laughed at John's bizarre insistence that he obey Jewish laws recorded in ancient Jewish texts.

But Herod was accountable. And John knew that he was accountable. And he calls him to account. Let me quote for you something said by another royal who celebrated her birthday on Thursday.

And this is a direct quote. For me, the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life.

[10 : 13] Very particularly focusing on what the queen acknowledges as her own personal accountability before God. Now the question is this.

Why is the queen, our queen, why is she accountable before God? Is it because she says so? Is it because she chooses to assume that accountability?

Is that why she is accountable? Well, that's not the reason. What the queen is doing, and is to be commended for doing, is simply acknowledging a spiritual reality.

She is accountable before God, period. And so was Herod, and David Cameron, and Nicola Sturgeon, and Barack Obama, and you and me.

We are all accountable before God, and we will all give account before God. Herod, for all his pomp, for all his power, was a man accountable before God.

[11 : 26] But John's action also reveals something else for us, a lesson for us, a challenge for us as believers. It reminds us of our responsibility as believers to raise a prophetic voice in our day and generation.

We too must speak for God to society. We must denounce evil and call to account the great and the good without fear or favor.

Now, in the case of John the Baptist, the moral issue that he raised concerning Herod was one concerning marriage. That's what it happened to be. Is that an issue for us today?

Well, I think the answer to that question is very evident. We're not going to explore that further. But evil takes many forms, and God's law is broad in its scope.

We must denounce evil in whatever form that it takes, the taking of innocent lives. We must denounce and call to account those who oppress the poor and exploit the weak, those who lie and rob and steal, corruption at different levels, among the high and the low.

[12 : 46] So, you know, we live in an age when we often hear the words. You've maybe heard these words. You've maybe voiced these words. You can't say that.

You heard people say that. You can't say that. Well, John reminds us that there are times when we must say that. Now, I acknowledge that there could be a legitimate concern that as Christians, our message ought not to be one of condemnation, but of love.

People might say that. It's not about pointing the finger. It's not about appearing self-righteous. You know, our message surely is a message of love, not of condemnation. Well, if I could be so bold as to presume how John the Baptist might respond to that concern.

I think John the Baptist would respond in a couple of ways. First of all, I think he would remind us that calling men and women to obey God's love is an act of love.

It is a demonstration of love. I'm reminded of the words that Moses directed to God's people as we have them recorded in Deuteronomy 6 and verse 3 when the law of God had been given to God's people.

[14 : 02] And then there are words of explanation and of exhortation concerning that law that had been given. And the people are encouraged in this way. They're told, Be careful to obey so that it may go well with you.

Why are you to obey God's law? That it may go well with you. And so when we call men and women to account, when we would have them acknowledge that they are bound by God's law and that they must obey God's law.

It's not an act of condemnation. It's an act of love. That it might go well with them. That it might go well with us as we are careful to obey God's law.

Perhaps John the Baptist would respond in that way to the accusation of being overly concerned concerned with condemnation. But I think John would also respond by reminding us that that's not all that he did.

That's not the totality of his message. That's not all he did. Call Herod or others to account for their sin. John the Baptist pointed accountable sinners to Jesus.

[15 : 19] Remember what he said, as it's recorded for us in the first chapter of John's gospel, when he saw Jesus. And others were round about him and he looked at Jesus and he cried out, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Yes, he was a man who denounced sin. He was a man who called the great and the good to account for their sin. But he also pointed to the one who could deal with sin.

He pointed to the one who could take away sin. And so we too must denounce sin. We are to call men and women to account.

But we also point them to the one able and willing to take away sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. John's actions remind us, challenge us as to our responsibility to call to account and very particularly those in authority over us.

Maybe if I could just give you one practical example in which you might want to exercise that responsibility at this moment in time. In the next couple of weeks, we have the Scottish parliamentary elections and different candidates will be vying for your vote.

[16 : 43] Well, you have the opportunity to quiz them, to call them to account. Those who have already been in the parliament, you can explore their voting record. See to what extent they have been concerned with God's law and submitting to God's law.

A helpful tool there, if I could just mention this in the passing, CARE, the Christian organization CARE, have a website, Engage 16. I think if you just Googled Engage 16, it would probably come up.

Certainly if you go through the CARE website, you'll be able to find it very easily. And there you can discover with your postcode the voting record of all your MSPs.

That's just one small way in which we can participate in this responsibility of calling to account those whom God has placed in authority over us.

As the church and as believers, we cannot remain silent in the face of evil and immorality, in high places and in low places.

[17 : 48] Our voice may be ignored. Our call to repentance may be mocked. Our efforts may seem futile. Our words may result in opposition and reprisals, as they certainly did for John the Baptist.

But we cannot remain silent. Men and women, all men and women, are accountable to God and they need to be told what John did, what his actions revealed to us.

But then also notice how Herod responds and also how Herodias responds to being called to account. The way I've described Herod's response is that Herod wriggles.

What do I mean by that? Well, there's this very confused response. In verse 17, we have Herod arresting John the Baptist precisely because of his audacity in calling him to account.

He casts him into prison. And yet also we're told that he protects John the Baptist. Herodias wants John the Baptist to be killed.

[19 : 01] But we're told that Herod protected him. He imprisons him and he protects him. Hence, I say that he's wriggling as he responds to this reality of being called to account.

He knew John was a righteous man. We're told that explicitly in our passage. He knew that he was a righteous man. And he also knew that as a righteous man, what he said was right concerning his relationship with his brother's wife.

Herod wriggles, but he doesn't repent. That's the tragedy of this account. He wriggles, but he doesn't repent.

That's not an uncommon response to being called to account by God. We wriggle, but we don't repent. I wonder if that's true of you.

You acknowledge that, yes, what the Bible says is true and that it points the finger at your sin and you wriggle, but you don't repent. That's what Herod did.

[20 : 10] What about Herodias? Well, we're describing Herodias as one who, she writhes and she writhes with anger at being called to account. She is indignant that this man, this apology for a human being, this religious fanatic, this homeless hermit, should have the gall to call her to account.

She who lives in the palace, she of great beauty and power and wealth, who does he think he is? She is the queen and she'll do as she pleases.

And though perhaps in a less dramatic way, the response of Herodias is a very common response. It's a very contemporary response of sinners today.

I'll do as I please. Nobody will tell me how to live my life. Nobody will tell me what I do behind closed doors in my own home. Nobody will tell me what's right and wrong.

Nobody will lecture to me on sexual morality or in any matters of morality. I will do as I please. Accountable to God.

[21 : 21] But we also have, and more briefly we're going to consider this next aspect of the relationship of Herod with God and indeed of the others, and that is a relationship of rebellion against God.

Notice the simple yet telling words in verse 21. We read there, finally the opportune time came.

And if I may just take those words somewhat in isolation. Obviously they refer to a specific moment in the history of this account, but those words, the opportune time came, is that not a description of our own lives?

Our days and our lives are punctuated by opportune times, times of decision. And I think some of those times, like on the occasion described, can mark the future direction of our lives and indeed our eternal destiny.

The opportune time when a decision needs to be taken, when we need to go in one direction, or another. In the case of Herod and Herodias and Salome, this was their opportune time to do good or to do evil.

[22 : 42] And how did they fare? Well, let's think of each character in the order that the events play out. And as we do, we'll discover that the decisions that they take are grounded in one fundamental question.

Who are they trying to please? As they take their decisions, as they determine what they're going to do, who are they trying to please?

Well, think of them in the order in which we come to them in the account. And so we begin with Herodias, Herod's wife. Who was she trying to please? Well, it's very clear.

She was trying to please herself. Her hatred for John was directly proportional to her love for herself. I think Herodias would have related to Justin Bieber's latest offering, you should go and love yourself.

Herodias was madly in love with herself. And so at the opportune time, she does evil and not good. She does what was convenient for herself.

[23 : 49] She does that which was consistent with her obsessive self-love. This man opposes me. This man is a man I hate.

I will kill him. And that will make me happy. She's trying to please herself. What about her daughter? Let's call her Salome.

In the text, she's described as a girl. Herod himself speaks of her in that way. Just a girl. That same word that we find in verse 22 is found earlier in Mark's gospel in chapter 5 and in verse 41, just the previous chapter, where it's translated as little girl.

I mention that because although we don't know the age of Salome when this took place, it's very possible that she could have been as young as 12 or 13, certainly not out of her teens.

When we think of that, we maybe can think of her, and rightly so, as a victim. She was a victim of sexual exploitation. This dance that she danced, I don't think it's untoward to imagine that it was sensuous in its nature.

[25 : 03] A victim. A victim of her obsessive mother. A victim of her foolish stepfather. And yet, even at that tender age, she was also responsible for her actions.

It does seem, as we read the account, that she performs her gruesome task with some relish. And she goes to her mother, what should I ask for?

And her mother says, ask for the head of John the Baptist. But then when she actually makes her request, she seems to embellish the request. Indeed, the order of words in the original seems to be a deliberate attempt to increase the drama of her request.

In the original, the order in which the request is made is as follows. Salome says this, I desire, what do you want? Up to half my kingdom. I desire that you give me immediately on a platter.

What is it? What does she want? The head of John the Baptist. So yes, she's following orders. She's a victim in many ways, but she seems to be relishing her task.

[26 : 13] At least that is what it would seem to be true. In Salome's opportune time, she does what is evil. Who is she trying to please?

Certainly not God. Is she just trying to please her mother? This very confused and bizarre woman.

It's a very sad scene. This young girl just trying to please her mother. Is that not a good thing? Well, it can be. But it's never a good thing for our moral decisions to be grounded in the need to please another.

Be that a mother, or a father, a boyfriend, a girlfriend, or a boss. And so, our moral compass is determined not by what God says, but by, how can I please this person?

And we could maybe give many examples of how we can go astray as we are imprisoned by this need to please another.

[27 : 24] What about Herod? When the opportune time came for Herod to do good or do evil, who does he try to please? Well, the passage gives us the answer to that question very explicitly.

In verse 26, we read, the king was greatly distressed at the request of Salome, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, the great and the good, the military commanders, the wealthy and prominent in Galilee, they were all there because of his guests.

John the Baptist's fate was sealed because this man, he had to please his guests. He had to look good before his guests.

And so, he would do evil. What he knew was evil, what was causing him distress, in order that he would please men. He was a man pleaser.

That's what he was. And what about you? What about me? Who do you spend your life trying to please? That is a very fundamental question for you to consider. Who do you try and please?

[28 : 32] You were created to please and delight in God. To direct your affections to another is to condemn yourself to a life of frustration and ultimate failure and rebellion against God.

But let's finally just consider one further aspect of this relationship with God, very particularly of Herod. And it is this, that he was judged by God. How does God judge Herod?

How does God judge anybody who chooses to rebel against him? The reality is that the account before us doesn't enter into that in any great measure, indeed in any measure at all.

But I think there are things that we can legitimately say in answer to that question, how does God judge Herod? The way I've formulated it is by considering three ways in which Herod was banished.

He was banished, or perhaps the language that would be more helpful is he was handed over to ever greater sin. This is one somber way in which God judges rebels.

[29 : 41] He hands us over to our sin. We think of what Paul says in his letter to the Romans in chapter 1 and in verse 24. He says, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts.

When men and women rebel against God, there comes a point when God says, well, so be it. If it's sin that you want to do, then sin on. He hands us over to our sin.

Is this what happened to Herod following this occasion? It would be unwise to declare that definitively, but certainly that is a way in which God judges rebels.

He hands us over. What we can say is that as we continue following the steps of Herod, we can see in his life the pernicious progression in evil.

Though he was responsible for the death of John the Baptist, it's clear that he did not delight in John's death. That doesn't really lessen his guilt, but it's true.

[30 : 48] He was greatly distressed, we're told. He takes no delight in the killing of John the Baptist. But listen to what we're told of this same man, Herod, as he participates in the death of another innocent man.

And turn with me to Luke chapter 23 and the account of the death of Jesus. And Herod has a bit part in the account. But notice the manner in which he participates.

Luke chapter 23, reading from verse 6. On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean, that is, if Jesus was a Galilean. When he learned that Herod was under, sorry, that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, Herod was a tetrarch of Galilee, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.

When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.

The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then notice how Herod participates in the death of Jesus. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him.

[32 : 08] Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends. Before this, they had been enemies. At the death of John the Baptist, he is greatly distressed, but at the death of Jesus, he's reveling, he's mocking, he's laughing. He's getting others to join in, in the death of this innocent man. There is this pernicious progression in the evil of Herod.

And I wonder, does that not reveal, perhaps, a man who had been handed over to his sin? Banished to ever greater sin, but we can also say that he was banished to Gaul.

Gaul is the old name for France. Now, what am I talking about here? Well, the Bible doesn't tell us this. But really what I'm making reference to, and I'll explain very briefly what I'm trying to say here, but the basic point that I'm wanting to make is that another way in which God judges rebels is by allowing them, let's say, allowing us, to reap the fruit of their evil actions in this life.

We reap what we sow. In the case of Herod, we're grateful to the Jewish historian, Josephus, for information about his later years. When Herod Antipas, the Herod that we're concerned with, married his half-brother's wife, Herodias, before he could do that, he had to divorce the wife that he was married to.

[33 : 40] She was the daughter of Aretas, the king of Nabatea, which was a territory to the east of the Dead Sea. Now, Aretas was less than happy at the treatment that had been needed to his daughter as she was displaced by Herodias, and in due course, he wrought his revenge by inflicting a crushing military defeat on Herod in A.D. 36.

Following that defeat, Herod's fortunes were at a low ebb, and he made his way to Rome in the hope that he might curry favor with the emperor and receive financial help to rebuild his kingdom.

But rather than that happening, the emperor Caligula, aware no doubt of the events that had taken place, banished Herod and Herodias to Gaul, and there he ended his days.

Now, if you'll forgive the frivolity of this reference, if you've ever read Asterix, you know what the Gauls thought of the Romans. He was banished to Gaul. Of course, this temporal judgment that Herod experienced is not always experienced by rebels.

We can sometimes, so it seems, get away with our rebellion. We see that in ourselves, and we can see it in others. But there's a third aspect to God's judgment. Banish to ever greater sin, banish to the fruit of our evil deeds, but also ultimately, in the absence of repentance, banish to hell.

[35 : 22] Ultimately, all rebels must stand before our righteous God, and, I repeat, in the absence of repentance and faith, be justly consigned to a lost eternity.

We have no reason to believe that Herod ever repented of his evil deeds. We cannot know for sure, no evidence of that being so.

And given that that is so, we can reasonably conclude that in due course, hell will be his eternal abode, judged by God.

What about you? Where do you stand before God? Are you a rebel under God's judgment? But our final word is not one of judgment, but of hope.

We are all, by nature, under the just judgment of God, but there is a way of escape, there is a way of liberation. Listen again to John the Baptist and the words that he directs to you, pointing you to that way of escape, that way of freedom, that way of that condemnation being removed from over you.

[36 : 48] Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. You're a sinner. I'm a sinner. We're all sinners, and as sinners, we deserve the judgment of God.

But Jesus, the Son of God, has come into this world to deal with sin, to take upon himself the punishment that we are due, to take upon himself the just judgment of God.

And he did so on Calvary. He drank the cup of God's anger to the full. He dealt with sin. And as the one who has dealt with sin, so he offers to you, and he offers to me, full forgiveness, freedom from the shackles of sin, freedom that we might be given a new life where our desire is to please God and to serve him.

Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that it presents the human condition in its stark reality.

We are sinners. We do that which is evil. We do that which is wrong. We live so often seeking to please ourselves. We may do so in a very respectable manner.

[38 : 08] We may avoid the gross excesses of others, but in our heart, we acknowledge that we are selfish and that our prime concern is so often to please ourselves.

We confess our sin and we ask that you would indeed be the one who would forgive us. We thank you for your glorious and wonderful and loving provision in the person of your son Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and who can take away our sin as we turn to him.

Repent of it and ask him to forgive us. Enable us so to do, and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.