

In our gospel today, we hear of John the Baptist's martyrdom. Mark slips in this story - almost a case of ironic understatement - straight after Jesus had sent out his apostles on a mission, warning they could be confronted with hostility. It's also quite appropriately inserted there; John the Baptist's ministry has finished, as Jesus' was getting going. John's role had been to herald the coming of the Son of God, deflecting attention away from himself and pointing towards Jesus; preparing the way for Him. John fulfilled his role right up to his tragic end.

Herod had broken the law by marrying Herodias who was his brother's wife. John the Baptist had publicly rebuked him for this – which must have taken some courage – it's never comfortable openly rebuking evil and injustice, and standing up for good. It's not that surprising then, that Herod's wife Herodias was embittered and hostile against John the Baptist – so when the opportunity to put an end to this man who'd had the nerve to confront her with her sin was handed to her on a plate (forgive the pun) she leapt at it.

It's possible that Herod might have felt a nagging twinge of guilt for letting her daughter's request be granted; when he first heard about Jesus, he said 'John who I beheaded has been raised', suggesting that he was haunted by his actions, and thought that John had come back to reckon with him.

I wonder if we can remember times in which our over-hasty words or actions have played on our minds in this way?

Herod's rash, impulsive promise, in the middle of his birthday banquet led to John the Baptist's death – suggesting he placed more value on his drunken oath and the respect of the guests present, than he does on John's life; he was willing to sacrifice others, in order to maintain honour, power and prestige. To an extent, this can be a very 'human' temptation, especially for those in power.

Have we ever, I wonder, said or done things because we fear losing peoples' respect?

No-one likes having their 'sins' or shortcomings pointed out. We're all flawed; Jesus knows this about us, more than anyone, yet still loves us. If we're honest though to God, we can begin to change from the inside outwards. Of course, we can't hide anything from God, BUT as in any relationship, communication is key. The very act of admitting our shortcomings to God needn't be an exercise in flamboyant self-flagellation. Just a quiet, heartfelt, simple admission is all that's needed. Forgiveness and absolution aside, confessing our shortcomings to God can be a very useful exercise in re-focussing on our relationship with God, which we can so easily take for granted. Acknowledging our fallible nature which constantly falls short of God's ideals contrasts dramatically God's perfect, never-to-be-exhausted source of love and forgiveness.

Doing this reminds us of our need for God. Doing things in our own strength is likely to take us to a certain point. If we commend things to God, asking to be filled with his Spirit – things that may seem insurmountable, things that we can't imagine we'd have the strength or capacity to do, may become possible – we can be prepared to be taken beyond ourselves and truly surprised. If this sounds a bit out of touch or over-pious, it's really not meant to be; I can look back at times when I've been amazed at being able to cope with things that seemed a massive deal and I've felt way out of my depth – and I've felt I've had no other option to say with blind faith 'Please help me with this, God!'

So, may we give thanks to God for his unending love and forgiveness. And may he give us the strength and protection to stand up for good, as we aspire to invite Him into every corner of our lives. Amen

## Response to the Bible Readings

Take some time to read each passage slowly. Look for information about where the story takes place and who is present. Who speaks? How do you think they are feeling? Who doesn't speak? What changes occur as a result of these events? Then think through these questions.

**Lightbulb:** is there something that shines from the passage or catches your attention? What seems new and fresh?



**Question:** did these verses raise any questions for you? Pause for a moment and pray about your questions. You don't need any expertise here. What comes to mind?



**Arrow:** How can you respond to the reading? Try to think of something that you could say or do differently.

