

**Opening music:** A setting of an early French tune for Psalm 121, made by Andrew Blackhall of Musselburgh in 1562, played by Alan Buchan on the Laggan organ

**Words of welcome:** As we move into the new year with all the current challenges it brings, we remember that we are not alone, and that all our circumstances are known by God who loves us. So we hear and sing the hymn

**Hymn:** God is love, let heaven adore him

**Prayer:**

Lord God, we come before you glad for the assurance of your love.

When we are anxious and life is difficult, it is reassuring to remember that you love us.

When life goes well and we are happy, it is enhancing to remember that you love us.

When we are deeply distressed and have nowhere to turn, you hold out your hands to us and gently call us to turn to you, knowing that in your love you will hold us and comfort us.

Loving God forgive us for the many times when we have not remembered your love, or have even doubted it. Forgive us for thinking that your love is shown only when life goes easily for us. Bring us to a more mature understanding and dependence on you and the love you have for us, which is always for our good.

And hear us as we pray as Jesus who loved us all the way to the cross taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever, Amen.

**Reading:** Mark 6:14-29

At the very beginning of his work, Mark tells us he is writing “the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God” (Mark 1:1) so what place has this sordid story about the Herod family and the death of John the Baptist in his gospel? Why did he put it in – in significant detail? What was he telling his readers when he decided to include it? He was not just finishing off the story of John the Baptist: he could have done that in a few sentences, possibly by just recording Herod’s speculation about Jesus being John “who I beheaded” returned from death. But he includes the whole story. It is not about Jesus, it is not a pretty story, it is not edifying in any way, but here it is within the pages of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Stories about royalty are always good sellers, of course. We see that today, with a glance at tabloid headlines on just about every second day of the week. But if Mark was simply seeking to gain an audience for a sleazy story about royalty – and it is a sleazy story – he would not have set out to write the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God, but something rather different. In fact, in repeating this story, Mark is simply reminding people of what was already in common knowledge, even if some of it was not quite accurate. For instance he refers to Herod as King Herod. Matthew and Luke refer to him more accurately as “Herod the tetrarch”, since whatever he was he was not a king and he knew it. A tetrarch had specific and limited powers granted under the emperor in Rome, on whom he depended. Mark also differs from contemporary historians on the exact relationship which Herodias had and had had with which of the Herod brothers (though that is a very complicated story in itself). Mark has what passed as “common knowledge” and it was quite enough.

Herod Antipas, who is the Herod in question here, one of the sons of Herod the Great, knew that he was not the King of the Jews, but he wanted to be. This is why he spent so much money and effort on renovating the temple in Jerusalem, since he knew that the temple and the authentic royal house had always been connected. But by the time Mark wrote his gospel, Herod's royal ambitions had back-fired and he was in exile in Gaul for having the temerity to ask the emperor in Rome for the title of King to be granted him.

But in the time when Herod had his ambitions, one of the stumbling blocks he faced was a godly prophet called John. John, who had been preaching repentance, did not hesitate to call out Herod for his law-breaking and semi-incestuous marriage. John was gathering crowds to listen to him. John was pointing out the disconnect between their faith and their lives, and so his teaching also highlighted the disconnect between the ambitions of the man who was spending money on the temple, and his actual life. If he wanted to become the King of the Jews he should act like a godly ruler, not like a Roman princeling. And so Herod put the prophet in prison, and in time the opportunity came for other members of the family, to have him put out of the way for good.

Mark tells us this story in the interval between Jesus sending out his followers and their return. He tells it as a fill-in for that time of ministry. He tells it because what happened to John was not unrelated to what would happen to Jesus, and, indeed, to his followers. The call to repentance, which Jesus also gave, and which his disciples were taking in their twos to the towns and villages around, is not just a call to private life. Indeed, in Jesus' day the idea of a private life was pretty much unknown. People lived far more communal lives than we do now. The call to repentance does not end at the door of our homes, but continues when we go to work, or to socialise, or to be a volunteer. The call to repentance is also issued to communities and organisations, to political parties and ambitions. And, Mark says, the disciple who goes out needn't think that everyone is going to like hearing that call. Not when it means that we ourselves must change, and that our political and social systems and organisations must turn around to do and be something new. Mark puts in this story to show that repentance may have a cost beyond the change in life that it asks for. Following Jesus changes a lot of things.

**Hymn:** Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?

**Reading:** Romans 6:1-11

The other interesting thing in Mark's story, another thing that foreshadows the story of what will happen with Jesus, is what we see in the reaction of Herod and others to the stories about Jesus which are circulating. Later Jesus will ask his disciples who people say he is, but now, now that he is sending others out in his name, the stories are beginning, as people are beginning to realise that this young prophet is not just a lone voice but is starting something: a new organisation. He has followers.

Jesus did not set out to be in confrontation with the powers of this world, and neither did John. They were not looking to set up a kingdom to rival Herod's or anyone else's, despite what the people hoped. But as first John and then, more especially Jesus brought in the kingdom of God in the way that he lived, and the priorities he modelled and the way that he treated people, so that the least and lowest was important; Herod and those of his ilk could see that their power was under threat. The power and hopes of Herod depended on force and threat and fear and was given to him unwillingly by an alienated people. Jesus' power was his attractiveness, and that lay in the way that he loved people and cared for them, in how he

obviously was not trying to gain materially from them. The power that is based on law and fear is wise enough to dread the power that is based on love.

So people notice Jesus and they begin to form ideas about him. Some said that he is Elijah – they were probably those who had national hopes: Elijah was to come before the great Messiah. Some said he was a prophet: another hope of the faithful was for prophecy to be revived, as there had been no prophetic voice for about three hundred years. But some, including Herod, thought that Jesus was John resurrected, and Herod in fact seems to have thought that such a resurrection would account for Jesus having power and doing deeds which John did not. Herod was picking up on a popular idea of the day - the idea of resurrection – and although he was quite wrong in how he applied it (Jesus was not John returned) and may well have been brought to such a thought by a guilty conscience, he was not wrong about one thing: in Jesus, and in his followers, the resurrection power of God was indeed at work.

At his baptism Jesus took on our full human need for forgiveness and foreshadowed his own death. Which is why when we are baptised, at whatever age, we are joined into Christ's death. But then following that baptism, throughout his ministry, Jesus was showing the watching people what life lived in God's presence, life lived beyond death and all that pulls us down can be. And this is why we who follow him, we who are baptised into his death, can also know – now as well as forever – the joy of walking in newness of life with him.

In Jesus God was bringing life to lives which were dead in hopelessness and sickness and purposelessness. And although like John, Jesus would find that bringing in God's kingdom of resurrection life would bring him into conflict with the powers and kingdoms of the world; although he, like John would find that the kingdoms of the world would lash out with deadly fury at him; yet in the end the resurrection power of God would work through and in him to bring hope not only to a few people in Palestine but to the whole world.

### **Hymn** Make me a channel of your peace

Before we turn to prayer, just a quick word about our prayer services. With our area entering Level 4 restrictions these can no longer happen in the church building. However while this is the case, we will see how it works to hold them on Zoom. So we will meet on Wednesdays at 7. To get the log in details for the service, please get in touch with me by email, so that I can email you the link (this will not work if you phone me!). I am not posting the Zoom link on the website because there is such a thing as Zoombombing, and we don't want our services to suffer from that!

### **Prayer**

Lord God we thank you that in Jesus' death and resurrection we too can walk with him in newness of life.

So we pray today for people who feel that life is getting old and weary and boring: that they may find your newness of life.

We pray for people who fear or who are drawing near to death: that they may find your newness of life.

We pray for those who are ill with Covid or with other illnesses: that they may find your newness of life.

We pray for those who are being born and living their childhood: that they may find your newness of life.

And we pray for ourselves, and for our community, for our friends in the Czech Republic, in Nepal and in other corners of the world: in all that we do, whatever difficulties or restrictions or worries that we face, may we live in your newness of life and to the praise of your glory. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

**Hymn:** Christ is alive! Let Christians sing

**Benediction**

Walking with Jesus in the new life he brings the world, may you know his peace and joy in your heart.

And the blessing of God almighty,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
be with you now and always. Amen.

**Postlude** Prelude on "St. Ann" played by John Crombie