

Sunday 12 July: Fifth Sunday after Trinity

The Death of John the Baptist

Readings: Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

My usual starting point whenever I'm invited to preach a sermon is to look carefully at the day's two Bible readings, and then to try to identify whatever it is that connects them, but I have to say that I found it quite remarkably difficult to identify any sort of connection when I looked at the two readings which have been set for this particular Sunday. The Ephesians passage is a wonderfully Pauline exposition of all the things which accepting Jesus into our lives is able to do for us, whereas the Gospel passage from St Mark is an account of the killing of John the Baptist, and it must be just about the only Gospel reading in the entire lexicon in which Jesus doesn't put in even an appearance.

I wish I could make sense of John the Baptist. He always seems to me to stick out from the rest of the New Testament like something of a sore thumb. All the other characters in the Gospels are there because of the necessary parts which they play in the narrative of the Jesus story; there are the members of his family, and there are his disciples and all the other people who follow him, and there are the people who get caught up in his various acts of ministry, and there are the fictional characters of the parables like the Good Samaritan and the Sower, and there are also people like Pilate and Caiaphas who were clearly important historical characters in their own right but who by chance found themselves being required to play a part in the story of the crucifixion. But John the Baptist is different. He also was clearly an important historical character in his own right, and we might well have heard of him even if he and Jesus had never even met each other, in the same way that we might well have heard of Pilate and Caiaphas. His preaching in the wilderness clearly attracted enormous crowds, and he clearly collected around himself his own band of devoted disciples, including the ones who we are told came to bury his body after they had heard the news of his death, but, unlike Pilate, and unlike Caiaphas, whose roles within the crucifixion story are to represent the worldly values which Jesus had committed himself to turning upside down, John the Baptist and Jesus were clearly very much on the same side, and Jesus accepts baptism at John's hands. So how does John the Baptist fit in? What contribution does he make? What can we, today, learn from him? What was it about John the Baptist that Jesus was able to build on, and what was it that Jesus added to John's contribution?

The usual way of looking at John the Baptist is to see him as being a part of the Old Testament's tradition of prophesy, and as being the last of the prophets prior to Jesus. This prophetic tradition is one of the most remarkable features of the Old Testament, of the Hebrew Bible, and it is unique within the literature of the ancient world in that it offers us a criticism of the powers-that-be from the perspective of a set of values which is perceived as being superior to the values which the powers-that-be operate by. And, probably very much as a consequence of Hosea, and of Ezekiel, and of John the Baptist, and of all the others, the prophetic tradition remains alive and well and continues to this day. If John the Baptist were around now I would imagine him as a bearded guru heading up protest marches and carrying his placard, living not off locusts and wild honey but off an organic vegan diet, and dressed very scruffily though not wearing goatskin because in this day and age it would be considered unecological. I would look for him alongside protesters marching against the invasion of Iraq, or against Israeli behaviour in Gaza, or against globalisation, and a couple of weeks ago he would very definitely have been out on the streets in Tehran. Being a prophet demands an enormous amount of courage, but there's also a sense in which it's relatively easy because all that a prophet needs to do is criticise, and there are quite a lot of questions which a prophet

just doesn't need to address, in particular about how things might be made better; "a voice crying in the wilderness make straight the way of the Lord", but under no obligation to spell out what the way of the Lord actually is, or how straightening it might best be achieved. If Iraq hadn't been invaded, how could the Iraqis who were being killed by Saddam Hussein best have been helped? What are the Israelis best able to do to stop Palestinian suicide bombing? If all the big banks and all the big bankers are to be got rid of, how are jobs for people who are unemployed going to get created? And how is Iran going to be governed next without degenerating into conflict and chaos? But John the Baptist was more than merely a political critic. What he appreciated was that all us human beings, and not just those of us who are in positions of power, are in competition one with another, and that this competition sometimes flares up into violence, and that, insofar as all of us, and not just those of us who are in positions of power, are out to get whatever it is that we are wanting for ourselves, it is bound to be at other people's expense, and other people are bound to get hurt. This is why he urged the crowds which followed him to repent.

Jesus shared John the Baptist's vision of what was wrong with the way the world is working, but the big difference between the two of them was that Jesus did a great deal more than just protest and criticise and urge repentance. He did come up with a better way of doing things, and he did spell out for us what the superior set of values actually is, and he did show us the ways in which these values are capable of being put into practice, and he did show us what putting them into practice is actually going to be like. He showed us God. He showed us how people are capable of living together without hurting one another, and how power is capable of not being abused, and this is God's way, the way of love. He set out for us in the Sermon on the Mount what the way of love requires of us, giving our coats to other people who are needing our shirts, and going the second mile with them, and loving our enemies, and he showed us how potentially violent competition can be preempted by turning the other cheek. And then, in his parables, he illustrated for us what a world in which competition has been replaced by love is going actually to look like, and he called the world when it is governed by love the Kingdom of Heaven. But there is a problem, which is that we human beings are required to live together in a world in which competition still rules, and we have to survive in it, so the gospel of love becomes impossible for us to put into practice all of the time, so we are all of us inevitably sinners, and we are all of us in need of repentance and of forgiveness, and the stories of his ministry, and in particular the stories of his healing ministry, show us how forgiveness is both given and received.

And then what about their deaths. The deaths both of John the Baptist and of Jesus were political executions in that both of them were innocent of any crimes, but in that both of them had to be got rid of by the powers-that-be because their influence was perceived as becoming subversive of the existing order of things. John the Baptist had criticised the marriage of Herod and Herodias, his brother Philip's widow, and Herodias found this criticism very threatening, and she thought that she would feel more secure in her second marriage if John were to be got out of the way, so she contrived a way of having him killed. And there have been thousands of other people, both before John the Baptist and after him, who have been got rid of in the same sort of way, and political executions of this sort continue to happen, most obviously in Zimbabwe, in Iran, and in the western provinces of China. And Jesus, too, was perceived as being subversive of the existing order of things, and a way of getting him killed was also contrived. But his death was different, and we are able to understand the difference because his death has been described for us, not from the perspective of the powers-that-be who were wanting him out of their way, but from the perspective of his bereaved friends who were able to understand exactly what was going on. What their descriptions of the crucifixion do is expose for us the whole sordid nature of political execution, and they enable us to see it for what it actually is. They make it clear to us that

getting rid of critics does absolutely nothing to shore up the existing order of things, but merely exposes its inherent rottenness. The better way of doing things, God's way, the way of love, is not to confront this rottenness by using its own rotten methods against it. God's only option, the way of love's only option, is to offer no resistance, but to remain vulnerable, and to accept whatever it is that the existing order of things intends doing next. And death in such circumstances kills off death. Death has no more dominion over us. Love triumphs over all the hurt which is inherent in the human world we have to live in, the world of competition and of doing other people down. Love triumphs over all of this, and triumphs even over death, and this triumph is glorious. The way of love becomes vindicated, and humanity is redeemed.

And this takes us back to the passage from Ephesians, because Paul was able to see all this, and to fully understand it, even before the Gospels had been written down. In Christ our release is secured, and our sins are forgiven, through the shedding of his blood, and therein lies the richness of God's grace, imparting to us full wisdom and insight. The letter to the Ephesians is not just a letter to the Ephesians, but a letter also to us, because we too, when we hear the message of the truth, become incorporate in Christ, and we too receive the seal of the Holy Spirit, and we too enter into our heritage, to God's praise and glory.