

Sunday 14 July 2024
The Seventh Sunday After Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Amos 7:7-15
NT: Ephesians 1:3-14
Gp: Mark 6:14-29

We seem to be having in the last few weeks a series of interesting and perhaps difficult gospel readings. Chapter 6 of Mark's gospel begins with Jesus' frustration in Nazareth, where we are told that *'he could do no deed of power there'*; frustration, being at the heart of the human experience, is a reminder that there is no power that can force the human heart; even Jesus could not force the human hearts of the people of Nazareth; instead, we have a God whose power is made perfect in weakness. Then we hear of Jesus sending his disciples and telling them to *'take nothing for the journey'*. And here, Jesus does not advise to travel 'light', but to travel with nothing. They are to depend entirely on hospitality. All these challenging episodes seem to be stacked up in this chapter. Perhaps this is not inappropriate for so tragic and challenging a moment in our world's history; so we ask ourselves, what is going on in today's part of chapter 6, when we are reminded of the circumstances behind the beheading of John the Baptist when Herod hears of the mission of Jesus' disciples, of the complicated relationship that Herod had with John the Baptist (both admiring and fearing him), and his succumbing to Herodia's request to bring the head of John the Baptist on a plate.

What we have here is what you might call an aborted act of reconciliation between the mission of Jesus and his disciples as shown earlier in the chapter and the political powers of the time. Even the detail of Herod marrying his brother's wife, being against John the Baptist's warning to Herod is not itself irrelevant. Marriage, a sign of unity, or concord and of fertility, both in Jewish and Christian interpretations, has been seen as a sign of the reunion of heaven and earth. Like Herod at the birth of Jesus, Herod acts again to abort that kind of union between heaven and earth.

John the Baptist appears in this moment to speak of the relation between the present and future, earth and heaven. You might say that John the Baptist had a dual nationality, he is a border land figure and as such he is a challenging figure too. This is not because he lived in the wilderness, but lived at the sharpest edge of human reality that we can imagine. He lives between the old covenant and the new. He lives as a representation of the spirit and power of Elijah and as the forerunner of the saviour of all humanity. Jesus describes him as the *'greatest of those born among humans'*, yet *'less than the least in the kingdom of heaven'*.

Here is a man who lives on the frontier, and whose work and preaching expresses that double nationality. He is a native of his own people. He comes from the very heart of the Jewish identity. His conception is announced in the sanctuary of the temple. He summons

the people of Israel to be themselves as never before, to be true children of Abraham, to find in promise and compassion, in faithfulness, courage and welcome what their identity must be. He does this because of what he does not quite yet see or fully understand – the new world, the kingdom that is about to dawn, the kingdom of which he is not yet a citizen where all this will focus on the figure of his kinsman, Jesus of Nazareth. He looks towards that future that he does not see. And in one of the most poignant passages of the New Testament, in Matthew's gospel, he sends messengers to Jesus, to say, *'it is you, isn't it?'*. I've got this right, haven't I? And Jesus wonderfully replies: *'go and tell John what you hear and see'*.

And Herod hears of Jesus sending his disciples to proclaim the kingdom where God's world, God's vision and God's purpose shape everything that we are; he hears of the disciples acting out that peace and reconciliation in their mission; but he refuses, like those who can't see, the possibility of that peace as he refused it with John the Baptist. And part of the force of the story, which should disturb us very deeply, is that to refuse this peace is to refuse 'life'; John the Baptist, therefore, appears as the forerunner also in his death and suffering. If we refuse the peace that is offered here, we are refusing to place ourselves where we can receive and give life, love and promise from others. So, there is a lot already there to make us pray, think and examine ourselves and our world. Saying no to the promise and possibility of reconciliation is a death sentence, not just for John the Baptist, but also for Herod and us who refuse it – our selfish self-oriented, short-termist and other ignoring selves. It's a frightening story and it's meant to be so.

At the same time, the lectionary for today reminds us also of the echoes of this in the call of Amos, not only to be a prophet, but it seems an unsuccessful prophet facing the authorities of his own day. We are reminded that to be a prophet in the Old Testament is not simply about being a figure of blazing track record of success. Amos is like John the Baptist: the despised eccentric. Remember how Jonah ran away! And Amos, like Jesus, faces the authorities saying, you do not know what you are refusing. You are saying no to life, you are saying no to your own future.

And that surely is the situation we are looking at and praying so earnestly about now as we look around at the Middle East with communities being destroyed in the most hideous and appalling way, because they cannot see that their peace and life lie with one another. And we can bring the discussion nearer home with the various frustrations we see in our society, of people unsure about the value of their pension, frustrations of our own graduates, not knowing if there will ever be steady employment. No one can live without the life of their neighbour. We look at Ukraine, Sudan and South Sudan, Yemen, Azerbaijan, and so many other places, where people seem to echo what the girl Herodia, as she is referred to in the gospel today says, *'I can only live if you die!'*. The gospel, however, says what it always does, *'I can only live, if you live'*. Jesus said to his disciples, elsewhere, *'because I live, you will live also'*. This is not just a pious remark made by a Jewish teacher 2000 years ago. It is what

Jesus says to us today, and what we must learn from him to say to one another: *'because I live, you will live also'*; *'because you live, I will live also'*. As we look to a new government with hope and expectation, the challenge is how we build up a society and establish relationships in which we are life-givers to one another, not death dealers.

Similarly, Paul, in Ephesians, gives the necessary alternative perspective: *'he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'*. There is then the union of heaven and earth again. We look around and get worried about the tragedies we see. But, we are worried about prayer and penitence because of the joy that is set before us in the reconciliation between heaven and earth achieved by Christ. This is the pledge of our redemption: the marriage of heaven and earth has happened, is happening, and will happen in the reality of Jesus Christ. The gathering of all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth is celebrated here; this is here our marriage feast, our Holy Communion at this altar. The doors have been widely open, there is nothing more that God could give us or do for us. Sometimes, in seeing the cost of loss around us, we begin to understand the glory of the pledge that we have received already here and now. To this feast, we are all invited.

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