

Gospel: Mark 6:17-29

Herod was the one who had John the Baptist arrested and bound in prison
on account of Herodias,

the wife of his brother Philip, whom he had married.

John had said to Herod,

"It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

Herodias harbored a grudge against him

and wanted to kill him but was unable to do so.

Herod feared John, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man,

and kept him in custody.

When he heard him speak he was very much perplexed,

yet he liked to listen to him.

She had an opportunity one day when Herod, on his birthday,

gave a banquet for his courtiers,

his military officers, and the leading men of Galilee.

Herodias' own daughter came in

and performed a dance that delighted Herod and his guests.

The king said to the girl,

"Ask of me whatever you wish and I will grant it to you."

He even swore many things to her,

"I will grant you whatever you ask of me,

even to half of my kingdom."

She went out and said to her mother,

"What shall I ask for?"

She replied, "The head of John the Baptist."

The girl hurried back to the king's presence and made her request,

"I want you to give me at once

on a platter the head of John the Baptist."

The king was deeply distressed,

but because of his oaths and the guests

he did not wish to break his word to her.

So he promptly dispatched an executioner with orders

to bring back his head.

He went off and beheaded him in the prison.

He brought in the head on a platter and gave it to the girl.

The girl in turn gave it to her mother.

When his disciples heard about it,

they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Homily Transcript

Today's Gospel and feast is familiar to many of us and sometimes that familiarity can cause us not to go deeper into the story. We might say, "Well I've been there, done that. I've heard it." But let's reflect on the facts of this story and see what its application might be to us today.

Herod was the son of Herod the Great. This Herod in today's Gospel is called Herod Antipas. His half-brother was Herod Philip—a lot of Herod's in this story. Herod the Great was the one who had tried to slaughter Jesus and ordered the execution of all of the children in Bethlehem. His son is the subject of today's Gospel—Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas was married to an Arabian Princess but he had fallen in love with Herodias who is the wife of his half-brother Philip. Herod Antipas, to arrange the marriage, divorced his wife and urged Herodias to do the same: to divorce Herod Philip. They did that and they were married.

Now Herod Antipas was not a Jew and he wasn't bound by the Jewish Law but ironically, Herodias was of the lineage of the Maccabees and she was a Jew and so therefore she was bound by the Jewish laws of Leviticus that forbade this kind of divorce and remarriage. Herodias was the one who harbored the grudge against John because John's words were saying, 'Herodias you're in an unlawful marriage.' and saying to Herod, 'You're the one who engineered all of this, it's unlawful, it's against God's Word.

That's the situation they're caught in a situation that is against God's law and Herod is perplexed because he has enough goodness in him that he's attracted to the words of John the Baptist. John is this brilliant prophet. He's not afraid to speak truth to power. And yet Herod loves his new wife and is manipulated by her and so he's caught in the middle. What does he do? He arrests John but he doesn't execute him. If it was up to Herodias, John would have been executed long ago, but Herod is the guy who has the power and he's caught in the middle. He's in this position. He doesn't know what to do. Those are the facts.

Today's gospel, which is familiar to us as I said, is this story of intrigue. How does it unfold? Herod is vain and proud and when he throws this party (and the leading men of Galilee—and presumably their wives—are there); it's a prestigious event so it appeals to his ego. I think we can safely presume that in the midst of that there was a lot of drinking that went on. Herodias is cunning. She gives women a bad name. And so she manipulates the situation and when her daughter (from Philip) goes and performs what we can only assume was a very sexually titillating dance, Herod is excited and in his drunkenness and wanting to look good before the guests he makes this vain stupid promise, which of course, he would bitterly regret. He's manipulated by his ego; he's influenced by the alcohol and he's sexually excited. That's a bad combination and the result is he does something that he will live to regret. He orders the execution of John the Baptist.

Does that relate to us at all? Can we see people in power today who are caught in morally compromising situations, afraid to go forward and afraid to go back because they are caught?

People in government; people in business; people within the church...Can we see ourselves in this situation that we know what the right thing to do is but we're afraid to do it? Perhaps because we've surrounded ourselves with people—like Herod does with his wife Herodias—who will give us bad advice? Are we manipulated by those around us? Do we put ourselves in morally compromising situations because of the use of alcohol or drugs that cloud our judgment? Do we allow ourselves to be sexually titillated that draws us forward to moral decisions that we know are going to be compromising? All of those are factors that influence Herod.

Herod is not a black-and-white character. He's a very human character isn't he like us? There's good in all of us but all of us, given the right combination of pride and ego and drugs and titillation, make bad choices in government, in the church, in business and in our households.

The Catholic evangelist Matthew Kelly wrote a book in 2011 called *Off Balance*. Kelly says in that book, "Life is about saying 'yes' to the things that help us become our best version of ourselves and 'no' to the things that don't."

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St. Ignatius Loyola, over 500 years ago, put it this way: "I want and I choose what better deepens God's life within me." That's the criteria for growth.

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Today's Gospel is a cautionary tale is it not? Two characters: Herod and John the Baptist. Herod, who compromised and made a bad decision, goes down as one of the worm Kings of Israel; a spineless, gutless wonder. John the Baptist is held up today as the hero, speaking truth to power; being willing to suffer the consequences of speaking that truth; not backing down in the face of intimidation and willing to surrender everything for what he knows is right.

Let's pray for that kind of strength for ourselves and for our leaders in government and business and in the church. Amen? Amen.