

John's Head

We may have heard the story many times over. John the Baptist, the wild prophet, receives a royal invitation to a high-class party. The only drawback is that he's not allowed to bring his body. And the scene is not difficult to imagine: it's a Jewish banquet. It's a royal party. You can guarantee that there is a lavish excess of good quality red wine. You can imagine how fuzzy the evening will have got as it progressed.

And after a view hours, Lady Gaga performs her latest number, much to the enjoyment of everyone present. And since Herod Antipas, like every other dignitary, has his beer goggles well and truly in place, he offers his daughter anything she wants. And, probably best to picture this in a Lady Gaga video, she goes rushing to her mother to plot about what gift she could claim.

And Herodias, the mother, sobered up with scientifically unfeasible speed the moment she hears her husband utter the words, "half my kingdom". John the Baptist has been an outspoken critic of her marriage, and it was obviously a touchy subject. There had even been a war because of Herod's ex-wife's Father, Aretas, that required Roman intervention to avert disaster. This was certainly a high profile marriage. And it's understandable that it was a touchy subject, which John steam rolls through in his outright condemnation.

So... what is the phrase? Hell hath no fury...? But the fury of Herodias is methodical, measured, patient. And she seizes her opportunity, and sends her daughter to demand the head of John the Baptist. At this point, Herod himself sobers up surprisingly quickly. Politically, John had a big following and it seems that Herod seemed to enjoy listening to him. But his wife and daughter had him well and truly in a bind, and so he concedes. And that is the end of John the Baptist. Execution in the palace of the King, for the pleasure of an alcohol-fuelled evening of frivolity.

How horrible is that. We jolly well ought to point the finger and declare John's killer guilty! But, if you're one of those people that likes to blame individuals for evils you yourself would never commit – then you start to face some difficulties here. It's a bit like a Who-dunn-it question:

Was it Herod, who gave the demand? Was it Herodias, his wife, who plotted this? Was it their daughter, Lady Gaga who abused her gift? Was it the executioner who did the job? Was it John himself, saying the kind of things that were going to get him arrested and condemned in the first place? Or was it Colonel Mustard, in the conservatory, with the lead piping? Who killed John the Baptist? John the Baptist, God's herald of justice: who silenced the voice of justice? I'll tell you who it was: it was you... and me.

This is a story that gives an insight into the way that injustice worked in as complex a way in first century Palestine as it is today. The reality is that a whole host of people were responsible for the death of this one man. And yet every one of them could claim that they were a helpless part of the process, and blame it on everyone else. Isn't that precisely what we see in our world today? We want to point the finger, but we can't. And if we rush to blaming individuals – be it MPs, or Wealthy Bankers, or Political Leaders, or characters in this story. And this tragic story of John leaves us who hear it, tutting, and condemning and probably not realising that we are one of those characters in the story who contribute to the

unjust death of a man who stood for justice. If we revisit these 4 characters we can probably identify ourselves with at least one of them.

Herod

I wonder if you have ever been in Herod's situation. Allowing peer pressure to make you do something that is wrong. I've little doubt that if we asked Herod about this, he'd use that age-old cowardly cop out ... "I had no choice". It's the kind of thing we hear everywhere today. You hear it in divorce courts, you hear nations use it to justify waging war overseas - When courage or hardship or sacrifice is required to make a decision, it is much easier to absolve ourselves of responsibility and say "I had no choice". There are some things of course, about which we do have no choice. But if we make a decision, issue a command, make a demand - we have already exercised our choice.

Herodias

Herodias has been hurt. And she is nursing her wounds, and biding her time, and plotting and wanting revenge. When someone hurts you, or undermines something precious to you - what do you do? Murder them? No, you're more likely to wage a credibility war. More likely to engage in character assassination. Not necessarily overtly. But quietly, through smiles and tears and sharing your prayerful concerns about another person, we play precisely the same game as Herodias. If Herodias were here today, she would have a silver tongued ease of management speak, the winsome smile, the listening ear, the sympathetic gestures. Everything at her disposal to exert the power she needs to conduct her assassination.

Salome

And then there is Salome. Using her charm to get all she can from any situation - rather like some MPs and their expenses. "You can't blame me for that because I thought I was entitled to it." I've heard mothers use that line to justify their attempts to block the father's access to his children. Most soldiers in the British armed forces today apply the same logic with their travel claims - 4 big travel claims a year, - no receipts required - and it's astonishing how many of these soldiers have to travel to fictional parts of Scotland 4 times a year. And they are encouraged by their seniors to make these bogus claims. And if it was wrong for Salome to claim the head of John the Baptist, you can't blame her, because she was entitled to it.

Executioner -

"I was only following orders." We would never say something like that, surely! Because we heard concentration camp atrocities justified by the guards who committed them, using those very words. And we know about the Holocaust. And we've learned our lesson from history. But the thing about the Holocaust is that it is not some shameful moral blip for the modern world, so much as a window into how the modern world works. I have heard Policemen implying exactly the same logic as they wake homeless people in the night, against their own better judgement, so that they can hose down the place where they were trying to sleep. Perhaps more controversially, in Christian circles, we can have principles and laws that we live by, that we think are biblical, and which are utterly dehumanising when we apply them to people. Because we are just living by our principles: in our evangelism we can condemn people to hell, in our sexual morality we can impose our principles on them, in our worship we can claim that they are not real Christians if they don't worship like we do.

Who killed John the Baptist? Who silenced the voice of justice? It was you ... it was me.

Conclusions:

Hold on a minute. We are a socially active church. We care about justice. We are deeply committed to charities that strive for justice. We may even work for them. We may work for the church. We may give sacrificially. If Saint Paul were here, he'd say that all of that stuff is irrelevant. And any smugness that we may feel about those things, in God's eyes are as valuable as the contents of used nappy. If our lives are led in such a way as to share in murder of the Baptist, we are as guilty as the rest of the world, of injustice – no matter what noise we make about it.

The passage from Amos – he is confronted with the High Priest, as a prophet – and yet he says, “I am not a prophet, nor a prophet's son.” Do not associate me with your little quest for justice. It is worthless as long as who you really are is out of communion with God himself.

It is the same kind of thing that Paul is doing in that famous passage, I Cor 13 – where he lists these great If I speak with the tongues of men and angels, if I give all I have to the poor, and offer my body to be burned. You can be the most self-giving, altruistic philanthropist, without relinquishing an ounce of power, and whilst continuing to play the power games that endorse the injustices of the world. And still, we silence the voice of justice.

The church is not a place where we are on the right side, where we bring justice over against the rest of the world who are just evil. We are no less evil. We are as prone to the power games that bring disaster upon our world. And we do that in our own most personal relationships at home, at church, at work. Having some technical box in our lives that we can tick to say, yes – we care about justice – does not absolve us from allowing the love of God to penetrate who we really are.

Individual Christians, and the church as whole, do not have some supernatural means of accomplishing their goal for justice. Sure, we might recruit God to aid us in our just cause, but that's just another form of paganism, no matter how many bible verses we hang on it. We are just another bunch of people who silence the voice of justice.

This happened in my house yesterday evening. My oldest son has always been on the side of justice. And it was late. And everyone was tired. And as I was trying to work, every few minutes a mini-stampede could be heard from upstairs. And I had told everyone it was bedtime. But – Willem is ten. He is on the side of justice. And he is proficient at Tae Kwon Do. It was not long before, the stampede ended, to the sound of banging, crashing, and screaming. Three little people streaming with tears. Willem, asserting over the sound – ‘go to sleep.’ His quest for justice, had hurt the very people that justice was supposed to serve! No wonder Jesus calls us to repent from our quest for justice.

It has been the case since the beginning, when Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. Grasping after the knowledge of what is right, and what is wrong – finding an objective basis for justice – is what got the world into a mess and keeps it in a mess. Because our world is full of contradictory claims about justice and what is right and what is wrong. Jesus does not call us to achieve justice – he calls us to love

God. Justice is a fruit of Christian growth, not the root of it. In the Hebrew language, *sadiq*, justice and righteousness, arise from *Shalom* – a peace where everything is working properly.

The church is just that gathering of human beings who are learning repentance and discovering *Shalom*. Just that group of humans who are encountering God. Whose lives are being changed by God himself.

And that, it seems – is what Jesus is about. Saving the world from its quest for justice. Calling us to repent from our quest for justice. Bringing people instead to encounter God, in all his life-changing, world-affirming, justice-making fullness. Because if it really is God that we encounter, then justice cannot help but be one of the fruits. We can then forget about justice altogether. If it really is this Jesus that we worship with our heart, soul, mind and strength, then justice is an inevitable fruit.

There is no such thing as justice anyway, justice is simply the name of a Roman Goddess. Biblical justice is nothing other than the process of God's will being done on earth. And that is not done, principally, by setting goals and targets and aims and objectives. It is done by worshipping this God in Spirit and Truth, because then – whatever justice blossoms will be the fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.