

*Readings: Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29.*

Ephesians 1.12: We are destined to live for the praise of God's glory.

For any of you who are not intending to sing Sweet Caroline tonight, here's an alternative invitation: to the Herods, for King Herod's birthday party. I'm told the daughter Salome is rehearsing a special dance. Why do we have to listen to this horrible story of the beheading of John the Baptist. More to the point, why do I have to sing it? Sundays are for nice things, not for Biblical Netflix horror. There are reasons, I suppose, but they are hidden in the wider context of the Gospel. Little chunks of Scripture on their own each week don't always make sense. The Beheading of John the Baptist is in the context of the disciples being sent out on their mission. This is what happens when you speak truth to power. Across the mission of God's servants falls the shadow of the Cross. Herod and John the Baptist foreshadow Pilate and Jesus. There are other parallels which we might never notice. One example: Herod's birthday is a banquet attended by those on the local high ranking celebrity guest list. In a touch of horror which has fascinated so many, such as Oscar Wilde and Richard Strauss, John the Baptist's head is served up on a dish, a serving platter. But there immediately follows in the Gospel another banquet, that given by Jesus in the open air, a banquet of loaves and fishes, life giving not death dealing, not for a guest list but for all, given by the One who had compassion on the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd. The evil and the good are that close.

We've had to listen to it, so what is behind the story of the Beheading of John the Baptist? It's about passing the buck, the shifting of the guilt, as would happen later at the trial of Jesus. The blame for the murder of John the Baptist is shifted from father to daughter, to mother. At the end of the story the actual head of John the Baptist is passed from father, to daughter, to mother. Nobody tells the truth. Nobody sees the truth except John the Baptist who has seen the Spirit like a dove descend on Jesus. It's crazy, isn't it? One of God's prophets is murdered apparently on the whim of a dysfunctional family working out their grudges. Did Herod have to keep his promise to give his daughter whatever she asked for? Who knows? Who cares? Actually Mark gets his Herods mixed up, but it doesn't matter. We are entering territory nearer to home, the fantasies which take people over, so that they no longer care what they do, random murders, knives in the street, terrorist bombs, sheer evil out of the box and on the rampage. The faith which we know in the good times is going to have to cope with all this. Christians try to be realists, not fantasists like the Herod

family. We shall see the truth about ourselves and each other, discovering that we are the new people of God, destined to live to the praise of God's glory, as we heard in the Letter to the Ephesians. But there will be opposition to the truth, both from within our selves, and from the outside, from others, and from forces which appear random or beyond all control. Herod's world is the real world. This is the world in which we worship. It isn't just about other people. Today's Gospel is about moral anarchy which catches up with us, for you and I are Herod, clinging to what little power we have, wary of God's holy prophets and what they might say to us. And worried too about what others think of us. Herod murdered John, someone he liked listening to, because Herod didn't want to lose face in front of the important guests he'd invited to his birthday party.

How do we confront evil? The first chapter of the epistle to the Ephesians is a glorious song. The horror of Herod's party is balanced by one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible. Here is our answer to the Herods without, and the Herods within. At any time, in any age, God chooses us. He creates a new people. We are called to make our first faltering footsteps in the kingdom of God. We see God's love for us in the life and death of Jesus and we give God thanks and praise. Worship raises the spirits, doesn't it? It raises our spirits because worship shifts our attention from our self-indulgence with our own condition to the Creator of the universe and what He is doing. The Herods were stuck in a little family triangle, bound together by fear and deceit, obligations, bargaining. No way out, except through an explosion of perversity and killing. Christians can break free from these destructive patterns, because God has taken us out of ourselves and into His mystery. We are, and we soon will be literally, unmasked, known for who we really are, the children of God. We are part of God's plan, "the plan for the fullness of time", helping to build God's kingdom, and we are equipped to do just that. We are called to do this. We "have heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation", we can experience personal liberation and forgiveness, our response is praise, and glory, and worship. Anyway, this evening, on balance, I think we'll give the Herods a miss and go to Wembley and sing Sweet Caroline.

Fr. Julian Browning