

SERMON TRANSCRIPT



Ormskirk Christian Fellowship
Sunday 23 February 2014

The Man Who Missed The Mark

Seven weeks ago (I can't believe it's that long already) we spent some time looking at one of the King Herods mentioned in the bible – a man called Herod The Great, and some of the awful things that he did in his life. We tied that in with our series looking at various characters found in the Christmas story, and we looked at the clash of two worlds. I told you that really, the sermon last time was the story of two kings, one of them called Herod and the other called Jesus. Herod the Great and Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

But seven weeks ago, if you can remember back that far, I also told you that there was a second Herod we mustn't get confused with, and this morning, I want us to spend some time looking at him. He turns up just over 30 years later, once again as the king of Judea. We're going to look at a turning point in his life: a time when he had to make a decision.

Mark 6 : 14-29 (NIV)

King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." Others said, "He is Elijah," and still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!" For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered.

At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

When you begin to look at this story, for one minute your heart goes out to Herod, caught up in all of his difficulties and his power struggles and the problems with his wife, and the next minute he annoys you immensely and you feel without a doubt he's the most hopeless figure in scripture. In many ways, I'd suggest he's perhaps the biggest fool you will ever read about. There's a sense of amazement that anyone could come so near to the Kingdom of God and still miss it in the way that Herod Antipas did. He had this decision to make but he wavered and wobbled; he went one way and then the other. When he comes face to face with John the Baptist, John repeatedly says just one thing to him: "repent". Herod had illegally married his brother's sister, so John comes along and tells him, "Herod, this is wrong, you've got to repent; you've got to decide to turn away from this life."

Wow. Didn't mess around, John the Baptist, did he ... have you ever noticed that? Let's just be clear about this ... we're talking here about the king! John didn't indulge in trivialities ... he didn't try to skirt around the issue, he just came straight out with it; "Herod, you've got to repent." That word simply means to turn around. So too with Jesus: whenever you read the story of Jesus meeting people, you will find every single time he presents them with only two alternatives. He pictures them on the broad way or the narrow way, a wide and narrow gate, having a house on the sand or one on the rock ... he calls every human being to decide either for him or against him ... there's never any middle ground, there's never a third option.

Jesus' preaching always led to a decision ... even today, that's something that gets drummed into bible college students "always preach for a decision" ... you understand what I mean by that don't you? Speakers aren't supposed to just stand up and educate people; they should lead them to a point where they've got to make a decision. If you bear that idea in mind, you start to see everything that Jesus said with new eyes; everything he said, to everyone he met. Nicodemus, you must be born again ... make a decision. Zacchaeus, I want to come to your house for tea ... make a decision. Peter, do you love me or do you not ... make a decision.

Well, let's look at the decision that Herod Antipas made. First of all, whatever else you and I may think about him, we need to give him credit for one thing; he did recognise that John was a holy man. Many others failed to recognise that, but Herod saw it, and it greatly influenced his life. John couldn't be ignored or brushed aside. Herod's wife, Herodias, had already tried to do that; the bible says she frequently sought to destroy John. Herod would have none of it, but just to keep the peace, he does agree to put John into jail at a castle called Machaerus (Mak-kir-ras). Do you remember a few weeks ago, I talked about the twelve fortresses that his father, Herod the Great had built? Well, Machaerus (Mak-kir-ras) was one of them.

So John gets thrown into prison, but there's no way that Herod will have him put to death. However difficult John may have made things for him, Herod clearly saw that he was a man of God, and to a degree, he respected him. If you use your imagination for a moment, you can probably picture the scene. John's been thrown into prison, but periodically, in the darkness of the dungeon, Herod makes his way down the steps, past the jailers to stand outside the bars and talk to him. Herod knew there was something about him. He was **almost** convinced, do you begin to see that ... **almost** convinced, "What John says is right, I've got to change."

Friends, that's true of so many people today as well ... so many people are **almost** convinced of the Christian life. Some of them hear about the lives of other Christian men and women. Some find their hearts moved when they read the Gospels; moved even more when they read about the love of Jesus who died on a cross for them. And just like Herod, they're **almost** convinced ... **almost**. John knew that his preaching was affecting this king.

Whilst at home in his palace, listening to Herodias his wife and the counsel of all his advisors, Herod was **almost** convinced that John was some kind of manic who had to remain locked up, yet he'd still make his way down to the dungeon from time to time, and there, he was **almost** persuaded by John to turn around and follow God. Herod would sit outside the cell listening to him; they might have conversed for hours. Herod knew that truth was on John's side. Nobody could deny the essential truths of the Christian faith; that love and gentleness and peace and faithfulness are the bedrock and the makings of a great society. The more time he spent with John, the more Herod knew in his heart of hearts, "This man is right" and friends, that's the thing about truth ... there **is** no denying it.

Time and time again, Herod would go down into the prison to visit John. He knew in doing so he was displeasing his wife who had this power hold over him ... he knew he was displeasing the courtiers ... he knew that people were mocking him behind his back, but time and time again he would go and sit outside those bars to talk with John. There was a fascination about John the Baptist. Herod was drawn there; he knew even before he went down to that dungeon what he was going to hear. Isn't that strange? John the Baptist never once changed his message; they never became best mates. The king already knew as he walked down those steps exactly what John was going to say; "Herod, you've got to repent." But he still went to visit him.

Friends, that's the Spirit of God at work there, convicting a man and drawing him towards that point of decision I mentioned earlier. The Spirit of God drew Herod to hear the words of one of God's people. Like a moth to a candle, he just couldn't keep away, and every time he came to John, the bible says, "He liked to listen to him." How else can we explain or understand that? So too with many people even today: they'll go along to church, they'll listen to the Gospel, and they'll feel the prompting of the Holy Spirit. But all too often, just like Herod, somehow after they've heard, they still turn down the offer of salvation and friendship from a holy God who died on a cross, and they go straight back to wherever they came from. I cannot begin to comprehend that ... how does that happen?

Well, a lot of the time, they do exactly what Herod did. He didn't stop to think things through. He became content with certain feelings, or to put it another way, he became a slave to his environment. If he was with Herodias having a party in the castle with all his friends, he felt good, but when he went down to the dungeon to spend time with John, he felt bad. Whatever environment he was in, Herod found himself shaped by it, but he didn't stop to think about it, he just let it happen. Herod was fickle. He was easily swayed.

But he **did** listen to what John said. In the NIV it says here in verse 20 that Herod was greatly puzzled, but that's not really a very accurate translation. If you look at the bottom of the page in your bible, you might see a footnote about this verse, because if you read the original text what it really says is that Herod did many things, or in some versions, many puzzling things ... things that perhaps seemed out of character for him ... there was a change in his behaviour. After he'd been listening to John, Herod did many things ... everything, except the one thing that was most important. Isn't that the saddest statement of all? I can comfortably believe that Herod may have put right some of his wrongs. I can believe that he perhaps became a bit kinder. I can believe that he maybe gave some stuff to the poor, drank less, cursed less and showed a bit more compassion ... but what staggers me, is that the one thing he should have done the most, he didn't.

Herod did many things, but he never did the one thing John asked him to do. John never told him to give up drinking, John never told him to stop cursing, or to be kind. John said, "Repent ... turn around." But Herod wouldn't do it. He wouldn't give up his immoral life, and his illegal attachment to Herodias, his brothers' wife.

Friends, I've got to tell you, that's the problem with so many people today ... they're willing to do many things ... go to church, give to charity, smoke less, drink less, be good citizens ... willing to do everything except the most important thing in life ... to give themselves to God. Doing many things has never been sufficient. We, collectively, could not save one soul in this room, could we? Even if you spent the rest of eternity working for God, you still couldn't save one soul. If you ever think that you can, please come and explain to me why the Son of God needed to hang on a cross ... if anything you could do would be sufficient ... because it's not.

Well says the bible, Herod threw a birthday party, and there, out of lust for his step-daughter, a 17-year-old teenager, he looked across all his guests, saw Salome and he said to her, "Will you dance for me?" Salome says, "Ah, I don't know". "Please Salome," he says, "just dance for me ... I'll give you even half of my kingdom." So she agrees ... this 17-year-old girl stands there in the middle of the banqueting hall, the musicians begin to play, and she dances. When the dance finishes, she comes over to Herod and he says to her, "Anything Salome, anything up to half of my kingdom, what will it be?" Salome looks Herod in the eye, and then she replies, "Give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter." Herod's face drops.

Verse 26 says, "**The king was greatly distressed,**" ... talk about an understatement ... that's an intensely strong word in the original text ... "**but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her.**" Let me tell you friends, that's got to be one of the saddest verses in the whole of scripture. Here's a man whom God loves, whom God has already brought into contact with John the Baptist, so that he can learn the way of salvation. Through John, God clearly said to him, "Herod, I love you, but you've got to turn around" ... and Herod missed the mark. Trapped, caught like a rabbit in headlights, he looks around at everybody else in the room, and in that moment, in his heart of hearts, he despises them all.

You see Herod knew that they were wrong, he knew that John was right; but a selfish concern for his own reputation, his own popularity caused him to waver. He decides to sacrifice the right, for the sake of the wrong. He rejects God. He rejects the offer of eternal salvation; he rejects all the treasures of heaven. Why? For fear of his dinner guests, and a 17-year-old girl. Isn't that staggering? But friends, let me tell you something ... you and I both know people travelling down the same road, and they're going to sell themselves for a lot less than that.

Herod says three words, "So be it" and gives the order to have John beheaded in the dungeon. This is a real man, a real king, who lived a real life, and lost it all because of a stupid promise. Friends, what does it matter if the whole world laughs at you, so long as you're right with God? Salome was never going to be the judge of Herod's life, God was. Your neighbours, friends, workmates ... whoever is going to laugh at you, they won't be the judge on the last day either ... God will. Herod Antipas: the man who lost it all ... so near, and yet so far.

Do you know whom Jesus described as the greatest man who ever lived? John the Baptist. Just imagine having his execution on your report card when you stand before God! How terrible his life must have been after Herod had John beheaded. I suspect he saw more of John after killing him, than he did while John was still alive. I think he lived the rest of his life haunted and tormented by the image of that head on a plate coming towards him ... it must have played on his mind. Why do I think that? A short time later when Jesus comes onto the scene, whilst many other people thought that he was Elijah or a prophet from long ago, verse 16 tells us that Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life. That's how much it preyed on his mind. Poor king Herod, the man who missed the mark.

What will history say about your life? That just like Herod Antipas, you lost it all for the sake of a job, a relationship, family, a relative, a bag of money, a bottle of alcohol, or the next fix? Do you really want to miss an eternity with God for that? What does it matter if the whole world laughs at you, so long as you're right with God? Are you, like Herod, doing many things, except the one thing that you really need to do? Will you do it today? Will you get your life right with God, before it's too late?

Is there someone in your life who likes to listen to you? Is there someone the Spirit of God is drawing to you, so that they can hear His words from one of His people? Is your message clear, is it consistent? Do they already know before they meet you what they're going to hear? Is it faithful? Is it true? Are you the John to them?

Herod Antipas missed the mark ... so near, and yet so far. Friends it's so important that we also make a decision, and that we make the right one. I don't know where you are in your relationship with God, I don't know, just like Herod, if you've heard many things about him but you don't yet know him ... but don't miss the mark. This morning if you want to make that decision ... if you want to take that step which Herod should, but never did, then quietly in your own heart, in your own mind, perhaps you'd like to repeat this prayer after me:

Lord Jesus

I know that I have sinned, and that no amount of doing things could ever make up for that.

I know I need your help. I believe that You love me, and that You came to earth to die for me.

Please forgive all my sins. Please come into my heart and teach me how I should live.

I offer You my life, to use in whatever way You see fit. I trust You know what's best for me.

Thank You for loving me so much. Change my whole life I pray.

Amen