

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Trinity 6

Amos 7:7-15 Psalm 85:8-end Ephesians 1.3-14

Mark 6: 14-29

In speaking and listening, writing and reading, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Today's gospel takes us into the intrigues of a King's court, perhaps a far cry from the Galilean villages that we have been travelling through with Jesus and his disciples over the last weeks.

King Herod, a puppet king put in place by Roman occupiers has heard about Jesus – his teaching and his miracles- speculation is around about who this person actually is and links are being made with the prophets of the past: those who were calling people back to the covenant relationship with God, to the life for which God created them.

Something about what Herod hears reminds him of a person who is on his conscience: John the Baptist, and so the writer of Mark's gospel give us the story of Herod and John, bringing us up to date with the fate of the one who was Jesus' forerunner. The story has something of the feel of legend about it, and as such, holds a timeless familiarity about the experience of those who "speak truth to power" and the experience of those whose exercise of power clouds their perception of truth.

Herod, we are told, has married his brother's wife and this is something that John, speaking with a prophet's authority, has told him is not right. Therefore, we are told, Herodias, the woman in question had a grudge against John and wanted him dead. There is much in the telling of this story which, seen with today's eyes, falls into the patriarchal tendency to blame all failures in morality on the influence of women, but I want to focus on Herod's confusion and lack of a moral compass.

Herod has committed himself to a relationship which has disregarded moral norms and the wider context of the

relationships they have with others and John has held up the mirror to show him that. Herod has used his worldly power to suppress the critique of his choices, and he imprisons John. The surprising effect of this Herod is drawn to listening to him:

“knowing he was a righteous and holy man”

I find this phenomena quite fascinating – that often those who do not exercise wise and good judgement in much of their lifestyle are drawn to those who will speak of what is good and just and holy. I wonder that deep within all of us there is some prompting that knows what is good for us when we encounter it, however strongly we might also resist the change it offers us in our own lives.

The prophet is the one brave enough to bear witness to the hope that we are all made to live, love and act with the integrity, generosity and selflessness which enables both others and ourselves to flourish, to continue to bear witness so that when we fall far short of the ideal, the soul’s deeper knowing has something to listen to, to be attracted to, perhaps even to move towards.

Herod’s conflicted soul recognises John’s integrity but is overwhelmed by other influences – the desire to flatter his new family, and fear of losing face with the great and the good who prop up his puppet kingdom. He is not strong enough to resist those false goods and save the one who could show him a better way to live so John dies at his command, brutally martyred.

John’s part in this story shows what is possible for a person within whom there is no confusion, and whose moral compass is fully aligned by God’s magnetism. In the midst of the moral chaos of this court, the man in the prison, the prophet, is the still centre, able to challenge what is causing the chaos, to give wise, righteous and wise advice when it is sought. John’s relationship with the God who has called him as prophet is the guiding force in all that he is, and as such he can fearlessly resist doing anything purely to curry favour or save his face, or even his life.

I wonder, when you consider both the men in this story how each makes you feel? Which engenders a sense of trust and peace? Which would you rather be like?

I find that as I consider John I see someone who is steadily anchored, who knows who he is, whose he is, and what is truly the source of life for him. A man of God, who reveals God's steadfast love in the steadiness of his conviction.

It takes me back to the image of the plumb line we are offered in the reading from Amos we are offered today.

God tells Amos:

See, I am setting a plumb-line
in the midst of my people Israel;

assuring Amos that at a time of chaos in his communal life, God would give a guide that helped the people see what was "true": aligned to God's creative will.

Personally, I think it is an image that vividly reflects my own experience. Surrounded by all sorts of outside influences and a mixture of apparent desires, we can often make misguided life choices, take up unhealthy habits, respond without love to the events of the world, be self defensive, or fearful, and as modern psychology shows us, be driven by all sorts of past events – life can feel like a swinging pendulum.

But, thank God, there are times when we experience that sweet spot of steadiness, calm, soul stillness, that is a sign that we have allowed the grace of God to lead us in what is for our flourishing and for the good of those around us.

The more we open ourselves to God's grace, the more we experience that sweet spot, the closer to that anchored figure of John the Baptist, the prophet we become, and the more we offer a steadiness to a wider sometimes rather confused world.

God's grace is the plumb-line set in our midst, the power of God at work in us to align us with the loving purpose God has in our lives. We open ourselves by seeking the company of wise friends and soul guides for our own lives. We open ourselves to it as we pray, more as we pray regularly; we open ourselves to it as we allow our lives to be shaped by reading and listening to the Bible; we open ourselves to it as we contemplate the life of Jesus in

whom God shows us once and for all what a truly aligned human life is like. The sacraments of the church open to us this fount of grace: our baptism through which we are offered a sharing in the pattern of Christ's relationship with God, our sharing in the communion that is the gift of the real presence of Jesus intimately given to renew that pattern and relationship in our daily living.

Through these gifts of God we are invited to allow that deeper knowing of our souls, that we are made for love and all that is good, to be the best guide for the way we live and make good decisions. And we are called from that steadiness, anchored in the steadfast love of God, to be the prophets in our world that attract those who are seeking something new and life giving for themselves, a way beyond the confusion and chaos with which daily life, whether in a palace or a village can sometimes overwhelm us.

Gracious Father, source of all,

May our souls find their still point in you,

Align us with your loving will for our lives, and for the purpose you have for us for you world

Through the life of the Spirit in us, in union with Christ,

Amen