

Sermon for Sunday 11th July 2021(Trinity 6) 'Can a grudge ever be harmless?'
from Fr. Mike

- 2 Sam 6.1-5, 12b-19; Ephesians 13-14; Psalm 24
- **Mark 6. 14-29**

- **Collect**

O GOD, who hast prepared for them that love thee such good things as pass man's understanding: Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



John the Baptist Beheaded ('Hen-pecked' husbands/partners beware!)

History sometimes comes back to haunt us. As I write this against the backdrop of an historic international football 'grudge match' (England v Germany 2021) there are no doubt those who remember the iconic game of 1966 which resulted in national euphoria, together with regular disappointments ever since?! The 'grudge' in this instance is a tangled psychological ball of string we periodically kick about between us, that manifests in a perpetual clash of cultures, ideals and long-standing turbulence on many fronts between our two nations. Even after a 'win' the commentators still reference (and thereby almost preserve) past tensions. Although a very human emotion, the existing 'grudge' clearly has neither healed nor improved the situation. On this particular subject, it is as if we have collectively lost our heads!

Herod thought this was happening to him in today's Gospel passage from St. Mark. For him, History was belching once again, and it made him very uncomfortable. He had never successfully managed to keep the memory of John's murder chained silently beyond the boundaries of his struggling conscience. Of all the people he had executed (mostly enemies and criminals) John the Baptist was the one he actually regretted. History records that King Herod Antipas was a 'chip off the old block' - a self-indulgent and decadent individual, just like his father King Herod the Great. On this occasion his judgement and his morality were equally flawed. This king did not realise that the man he feared was John the Baptist raised from the dead, was actually Jesus the Messiah, the King of the Jews whom his father (Herod the Great) had tried to murder 30 years earlier in the massacre of the babies in Bethlehem. Although Herod Antipas often followed in his father's footsteps, the blatant murder of John the Baptist was neither a political assassination, nor an act of revenge or even of retribution. **It was merely an act of cowardice inspired by embarrassment.** He had made a foolish boast in front of two women and was simply too ashamed to take it back. **"Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom"** (v.23) was his declared oath as a King and ruler. So, he murdered the one bright spot in his otherwise decadent, hedonistic life. He had often succumbed to the ruthless demands of his wife (Herodias) – after all, it was easier that way. He assumed that one more time should not matter, as it had always worked for him in the past. But this time was very different. This time the situation was unlike all the previous times. The key women in his life, as mother and daughter, had ganged up on him to further their personal **'quarrel'** against John to such an extent that **'he would not reject her'** because the issue would clearly not go away easily or quietly.

John the Baptist spoke 'truth to power' when he pointed out to Herod **"...it is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife"** (v.18). His words infuriated Herodias, who subsequently nursed her dangerous grudge, allowed it to fester, and bided her time. Eventually her opportunity for revenge appeared during an important (and very public) birthday banquet. Her corrosive guile and cruelty were breath-taking. Manipulating both her husband and others, she demanded her husband take drastic and immediate action on her behalf. She required nothing less than **'the head of John the Baptist.'** Herod was publicly boxed into a corner. How he chose to respond to this dilemma would be crucial. As the story unfolds, we learn that John paid the ultimate price for a woman's egocentric grudge and a king's lack of moral fibre - literally with his own innocent head!

'On your own head be it' is a phrase we are probably familiar with in our own day and age? How many times have we been in situations where although it *feels right* to speak out, we do not do so because someone advises us (or maybe the thought occurs independently) that either consequences may be severe, or at the very least make us unpopular? Mark reminds us that speaking the truth sometimes has devastating consequences. **This was true in the First Century for Jesus and his followers. It is equally true today.**

Part of the human condition is to have a 'wrong relationship' (which the church defines as 'sin') with God. We occasionally wobble, sometimes fall, and are often flawed, yet we live as people with a steadfast Hope; knowing that the grace of God will ultimately work wonders - **if** we remain humble enough to allow it to do so, and try to love God **'above all things'**(see our 'Collect' for today).

It is a matter of sin management. Keeping the shame and horror of our sins 'out of sight and out of mind' allows us to function in the light as normal, decent human beings. It allows us, like Herod and his wife, to live with ourselves. But there is always that nagging fear that we repeatedly keep pushing back into the shadows. The fear that somehow, some day, one of those skeletons is going to come to life, crash its way out of the closet we have carefully constructed, walk up to us in the middle of a crowd and wag an accusing finger in our face.

How can we have a clear conscience? (please read this week's Collect) In short, by living our lives in a way that reflects our Collect for this Sunday. Trusting our lives to Christ means that we no longer need to manage our sins by hiding from our consciences. Remember Cranmer's 'prayer of humble access' at Holy Communion? It states that our '*sinful bodies*' *may 'be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us.'* Therefore, Jesus cleans our guilt, if we are humble and contrite enough to receive him, and God erases our sins from his memory.

If we are honest, each of us has at some point in our lives either planned, done or said things that we are not proud of... But you and I know that Jesus can clean out all the skeletons in all our closets — **if we want him to do so**. Why then, bear a grudge or suffer the misery of a guilty conscience when we do not have to? Perhaps now is the time to unlock the closets for our Saviour?

"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water."

(Hebrews 10.22)

Fr. Mike.