

## Matthew 14:1-12

### Death in service

I know you'll have heard the one about "is the glass half-full or half-empty?" The optimist says one; the pessimist says the other. It really is just a question of your point of view, of where you're coming from, of how you're looking at it – perhaps of your assumptions about life in general, even.

There's something along those lines in this passage we've just read, too. If you look carefully at v4, you'll see that John the Baptist's message to Herod Antipas had been a repeated one:

***... John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."***

(Matthew 14:4)

It's very clear in the way Matthew writes this. It's not "John had said" – implication *once* – but "had been saying" – implying some repetition. So if I were to ask, *Do you think John was wise to do this?* I might get different answers from you.

Someone might say, *Of course he was right to stand up for truth.* And someone else might say, *Was there a clear need to say something inflammatory like that?*

And actually, we don't know the background to what Matthew summarises in this short phrase. Do we have a summary of John's preaching over perhaps months, publicly criticising the morals of the national leader? Or is this an account of maybe repeated interrogation of John by Herod, such that instead of a public message of "It is not lawful for *him* to have her", it is John saying *to him, in person*, that "it is not lawful *for you* to have her"?

I think we might sometimes be faced with the same kind of problems. Do we take the initiative and say, out of the blue, unasked and unsolicited, things that will undoubtedly be provocative? Or could it be wiser to wait until we are actually put on the spot and asked nowadays, for example, our view on societal issues such as marriage in particular or morals more generally? Why *invite* opposition, we could well argue.

I think that how we answer that might be quite revealing of our own character and temperament. But what is clear in this passage we're looking at this morning is that, in this specific case, **a mixture of emotions and temperaments interweave in the oppression of the people of God.**

It could be that John said more than was necessary. It could be that he only made his position so clear and explicit when he was put on the spot, and simply could not avoid giving the full, straight answer. I don't think that we can tell.

But we, in our world nowadays, have to face people of all sorts, some emotionally volatile and sensitive, some more placid, some guided more by rational argument, others reacting violently in response to the latest bit of Internet fake news. And a common factor will be, we're told:

***Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ...***  
(2 Timothy 3:12)

Here in Matthew 14 we're told what happened in the persecution of one such person who desired to live a godly life. We won't all be called to put our lives on the line in the way he did, but we can learn to consider the variety of responses in the world around us to our witness, and therefore how to ...

***Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.***

(Colossians 4:5-6)

So I'd like us this morning to pick our way through three different characters we meet in this passage. But that might just leave us bewildered, I realise. So we will be finishing where the passage does. Even if the worst *does* happen, things are not hopeless for the people of God. We can still do what those saddened disciples of John the Baptist did.

***... they went and told Jesus.***

(Matthew 14:12)

As the song we're going to follow this with reminds us,

*In his arms he'll take and shield Thee  
Thou wilt find a solace there*

But, anyway, here we are, back in Matthew's Gospel, after quite a few months' break. The previous chapter, you might vaguely remember, is the one that is chock full of those wonderfully memorable parables:

***And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. ..."***

(Matthew 13:3)

***"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ..."***

(Matthew 13:24-25)

***"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, ..."***

(Matthew 13:44)

But the strange thing was that somehow, these sparkling, fascinating words counted *against* him, back in his home town. A question is asked:

***"Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? ... Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offence at him.***

(Matthew 13:54-57)

Actually, that's a question that has been asked before. We've seen some of the "wisdom" in these parables. "Mighty works" ... well, remember, quite a few chapters earlier, after Jesus had calmed a furious storm on the Sea of Galilee by just his words. The disciples' question seem entirely fair in that context:

***And the men marvelled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”***

(Matthew 8:27)

And this question is going keep hanging over us, until we get to chapter 16, and Peter is granted insight from heaven as to who this Jesus really is – and *still* misunderstands! But it is really odd that the people who should have known Jesus best, in his hometown, have already arrived at a decision. They *will* not believe their eyes. And for that, there are consequences:

***And they took offence at him. ... And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.***

(Matthew 13:57-58)

And yet, Matthew continues on, *something* was certainly happening. This news of “mighty works” gets as far as the palace:

***At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, ...***

(Matthew 14:1)

Herod's response to Jesus, though, was not offence, but fear. This is a man with a troubled conscience and superstitious thinking – *not* a good combination at all, if you want to get much sleep at night!

But Matthew needs to insert a bit of back-story here, so that we can understand where this fear comes from. We had met John the Baptist's disciples, a few chapters back, coming to speak to Jesus.

***Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”***

(Matthew 11:2-3)

So John is in prison then. Now we find out the details of why. And how that ended, with what you might call “death in service”. And we are given some insights into the conflicted people who brought it about, too.

Herod: guilt-ridden

Herodias: spiteful

Salome: naive

#### ■ Herod: guilt-ridden

So here's the king. Well, not precisely. His official title is *tetrarch*:

***At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, ...***

(Matthew 14:1)

Bear in mind that “Herod” is a family name, like “Windsor” in this country. We come across several Herods in the NT, and none of them are particularly nice characters. Back at the start of the book, we've got the one called “Herod the Great”, the one infamous for

trying to trick the Wise Men seeking the newborn Jesus, and then the slaughter of the innocents in the Bethlehem region. But he's long gone now:

***But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ...***

(Matthew 2:19)

We're thirty years on. Herod the Great's territory was divided into *three* parts after his death, and the Herod of our passage takes over in charge of one of them. Technically, a *tetrarch* should be one of four, coming from the Greek word for *four*, but in practice the word is used to mean a ruler officially two notches down from a full-on king. Never mind the technicalities, he *is* the local Big Cheese – and therefore one to watch out for.

But he doesn't come over as really very kingly, does he? In fact, it's quite interesting to compare him to the king we came across recently in the Book of Esther, who also seemed much more to be just carried along by circumstances and palace intrigues. In Herod Antipas' first appearance here, he's comes over, just like Ahasuerus, as almost comically troubled. So he has heard rumours about a miracle-worker. Name of Jesus. But a rather different alarm bell rings out loud in Herod's conscience.

***... and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."***

(Matthew 14:2)

Now this is rather odd, if you stop to think about it. John the Baptist isn't recorded as having ever performed any miracles. So, straight off, someone reported to be working miracles shouldn't have made Herod think of John the Baptist. But isn't that exactly how a guilty conscience works? You've got some kind of hint in this direction back in Proverbs:

***The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.***

(Proverbs 28:1)

There is the story told about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, I think it was, who sent anonymous letters to a dozen of his friends with the terse message "Flee! All is discovered!" ... only to find that half of them *did* leave the country!

Folks, can I ask you about the state of your consciences? For it seems to me that, as with quite a few other things, maintaining a state of healthy balance is difficult. It is quite possible to deaden a conscience, and I don't want to overlook that possibility. But I think far too many Christians are troubled by a conscience working in the other direction, *false*ly accusing you.

Remember that that is one of the prime works of the being we call "the Devil". Sometimes we will say "Satan", but it looks as if that isn't really meant to be a name, as such. In the OT, at the start of that curious story of Job, it's usually translated as a name:

***Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.***

(Job 1:6)

But in Hebrew that is "the satan" - the *accuser*. That is a function, certainly, almost an ironic *title* of "the devil". Come to the NT, and there's a Greek word. If you've read

Bunyan's *The Holy War*, you will have come across the arch-baddie by the name of Diabolus. That's a Latin version of the Greek word which means "accuser" or even "slanderer". That is one of "the devil's" chief works. Remember how he is described over in Revelation:

***And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God."***

(Revelation 12:10)

And yet sometimes we let our conscience do the Devil's work. It can prompt us to despair. Or it can prompt us into being religious. It can make us lose sight of the power of the blood of Jesus Christ to cover every one of our sins. Read in on Revelation 12, and we'll find something that brings us right back to John the Baptist.

***"And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death."***

(Revelation 12:11)

John can die in good conscience, but Herod lives on now with an accusing conscience. But in one sense I will still call that a *good* conscience: it points out accurately that he has committed a sin. It's stated in what follows. No matter what had led up to it, here is the bottom line:

***He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, ...***

(Matthew 14:10)

And because of this, he is both guilty *and* guilt-ridden. There are maybe circumstances that suggest he was bit by bit wedged into a tight spot. Just like back in Esther chapter 1, there's a boozy party – and again, in the society of that day, it would have been male only – with this one tantalising exception ...

***But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.***

(Matthew 14:6-7)

... and then there is a stupid promise made. A signed empty cheque is handed over, in effect. There is the awful prospect of loss of face

***And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given.***

(Matthew 14:9)

But the bottom line is that Herod chose to save his face, but it cost John the Baptist his head. Herod *is* weak, almost pitiable, maybe. But he is guilty.

And that feeling of guilt is meant to drive us *back* to God, to seek his forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. But if we will not do that, we will find ourselves not just subject, eventually, to the wrath of God, but also now open to the random and sometimes

ridiculous promptings of a guilty conscience. In a different context here, but with a similar result:

***For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.***

(1 Timothy 6:10)

That isn't a bad description of Herod here. You can almost have some sympathy for him. But not for the next character we meet:

■ **Herodias: spiteful**

***For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, ...***

(Matthew 14:3)

And what was the problem? John had done that most audacious of things: spoken the truth to a powerful person who didn't wish to hear it.

***... because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."***

(Matthew 14:4)

Now notice how Matthew is being very careful in his description of things here. According to Roman law, I'm presuming, Herod Antipas could divorce his wife, and Herod Philip could divorce *his* wife – that's Herodias – and the two of them could then be married *according to Roman law*. But what Matthew writes imply a higher law, against which these people are transgressing. And I wonder if that is why Matthew still insists on calling her ...

***... Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, ...***

(Matthew 14:3)

Now I'm not usually very keen on the phrase that sometimes gets bandied about when talking about marriage, "married in God's sight". Very often that is used in a ill-considered way to prop up simplistic arguments that actually end up very quickly in ridiculous self-contradictions. But I do wonder if that is what Matthew is implying here. Despite Roman law, Herodias *remains* the wife of his brother Herod Philip, as far as God is concerned. And therefore their current status is *sinful*.

Notice, please, that I'm not saying that all remarriages after divorce are sinful. And neither am I making any suggestions about what people should do if they are in a marriage that they now consider they entered sinfully. Those are two immense questions, theological and pastoral, that are for another time. I'm just trying to say that perhaps we should consider that Matthew knew *exactly* what he was writing there, and not try to mentally insert "former" before the word wife. And then let *Scripture*, rather than our current society, lead our thinking whither it will.

Actually, the marital situation Matthew describes quickly here is even more complex than it sounds at first. Herod Antipas and Herod Philip were half-brothers, as well, so we're getting into dodgy territory here when it comes to leaving one and marrying (in quote marks, perhaps) the other. Even more complicated in the next generation, when Herodias'

daughter Salome marries *another* Philip, another tetrarch, who is *also* a half-brother to Herod Philip. Which means that Salome ends up as aunt and sister-in-law to her own mother! Got that all clear now??

But doesn't this give you the impression that these are people who really fancy being a law unto themselves, and never mind what *God* thinks about it? And if someone like that has some political or societal clout, then woe betide anyone who dares to call them to account.

So whether John the Baptist has said something about this in public – or he is perhaps misrepresented as having done so – we really don't know the full background – John ends up in hot water.

***For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison ...***

(Matthew 14:3)

And, legal or not, Herod would just have bumped him off. But that would have been politically inexpedient:

***And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.***

(Matthew 14:5)

But perhaps Herodias has been biding her time, looking for an opportunity to do the dirty on John the Baptist – and who cares about her husband's reputation, if she can just get her revenge for his daring to call her to account! I think she must have worked out her vicious plan quite carefully – even at risk of her own daughter.

Folks, just bear this in mind, when it comes to being faithful to the name of Christ. You may encounter some come-back from people like Herod Antipas, people who are not particularly principled, but who seem mainly to be propelled by circumstances, like billiard balls bouncing around the table and knocking people in the vicinity over. And then there are the mean and calculating enemies, the ones who take the cues in their hands and line up those balls for the most deliberate and devastating effect, like Herodias.

And so she lines up her own daughter, and lets her loose onto the field of battle.

#### ■ **Salome: naïve**

I think I see this girl as mainly just naïve. Her name isn't given here, but I'm using it because this is the name that the historian Josephus later records for her. She has to be quite young – quite uncomfortably young, by modern sensitivities, for this part in the story. The word for “girl” in v11 is used elsewhere for a girl aged 12. I think we have to take this as suggesting she is no more than a young teenager. It is all very definitely seedy. Remember, an all-male boozy party:

***But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, ...***

(Matthew 14:6)

So yes, it probably means that we see Herod now as something of a dirty old man. I don't know how artfully Salome had been trained for this kind of seductive dancing, but

just as in modern law children of that age are *automatically* taken to be victims, the main guilt here has to be put at Herod's door, not hers. He should have known better.

And she is a victim of her mother's scheming too. Whether she has to confer at this point, or whether Herodias already has hoped for a promise like this from the king, and already worked out what to ask for, the king now finds himself trapped and outmanoeuvred.

***Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter."***

(Matthew 14:8)

A platter, possibly, because Herodias was not present at the feast – but it was the done thing for food to be taken *from* the feast to someone like that ... and a platter would have been an entirely usual implement. Herodias' choice morsel from the table of the King was to be the head of her hated enemy. Tradition has it that she pulled John's tongue out of his mouth and stuck a pin through it – vengeance for the words he had spoken against her.

And her own daughter is co-opted into the gruesome spectacle, pin or no pin.

***He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother.***

(Matthew 14:10-11)

Folks, this is meant to be a shocking reminder, I think, of the various people who might be involved in opposition to the Gospel. There are going to be people like Herod Antipas, for whom the Gospel is more like inconvenient, who push back by fairly blind instinct.

There are going to be people like Herodias, vicious and calculating, who will happily use all manner of underhand means to further their ends ... and woe betide you if you happen to be in their sights.

And there are going to be others who are more like victims themselves, like this young Salome, pawns on the chessboard of life, and far too often themselves casualties of the spiritual war being continually waged.

In fact, perhaps there are more like that than we sometimes think, if we look at those people we might regard as "enemies of the Gospel". Think of them with some compassion, I have to say, if this verse is true:

***And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.***

(2 Timothy 2:24-26)

So perhaps that is why this passage concludes with a very quiet sentence. No cries of outrage. No rants calling for vengeance. Just a calm mourning ... in which they involved Jesus.



***And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.***

(Matthew 14:12)

Folks, I don't know precisely what you are facing today. We all have some idea of the lockdown and the effects in general, but how it is affecting you and your family in detail, we don't. There are some things that we can still manage to share when the screen comes on and we do our virtual church thing, but there are probably some worries, some sins, some shames, that you still don't dare mention to anyone else, even one to one with people you really trust.

*Go and tell Jesus.*

There are some feelings you can't explain. There are some feelings you feel you shouldn't be feeling. And there are some feelings that just go beyond anything like words at all. We imagine the desolation of those disciples bearing the mutilated body of their teacher and giving it what scant honour they could. We imagine the desolation of people not able to hold the hands of their loved ones, as their lives ebb away behind the isolation barriers of a COVID ward. Or maybe we realise that we don't imagine those things very well. But we can still ...

*Go and tell Jesus.*

There's one of those old spirituals

*Nobody knows the trouble I see, Lord  
Nobody knows but Jesus*

But *Go and tell Jesus* – or something very like it – has been the response of the people of God down through the ages. I'll conclude with a very ancient version of something like that prayer, that would seem to fit for our current times very well.

***“If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar, if their enemies besiege them in the land at their gates, whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing his own affliction and his own sorrow and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear from heaven your dwelling place and forgive and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways, for you, you only, know the hearts of the children of mankind, that they may fear you and walk in your ways all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers.”***

(2 Chronicles 6:28-31)