

Mark begins his gospel by announcing the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But it's not like Jesus goes around proclaiming himself the Messiah or the Son of God. As Mark's story unfolds, Jesus' identity baffles pretty much everyone. His family thinks he is nuts, his townsfolk only know him as the carpenter's son, the scribes and the Pharisees will come to know him as a pain in their butts, the people with whom he interacts will think of him as a prophet, a teacher, and a healer, and speculate about the origins of his power, even going so far as to think that he was Elijah. The authorities will keep their eyes on him because of his ability to stir up crowds. One such authority was Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea.

When we read or hear scripture, it is easy to identify with the "good guys." We might see ourselves as faithful disciples, imagining that we would have understood who Jesus was and what he was trying to do. Sometimes though, it is helpful to see ourselves as one of the bad guys, because that can reveal to us the pervasive nature of sin. The story of the beheading of John the Baptist provides just such an opportunity because of the person of Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great whom we know from the gospel of Matthew and his story about the slaughter of the innocents. Herod Antipas had only a small portion of Herod the Great's territory and even less of his power, and despite repeated requests, Rome never granted him the title of king. Herod has heard rumors about Jesus and wonders if he might be John the Baptist whom he had beheaded brought back to life.

In Mark's depiction of Herod Antipas we will see a weak man, an unsuccessful man, a man who when he had to decide between moral and immoral actions, would always choose whichever action favored his interests which usually was the immoral action. In this way Herod Antipas is not unlike anyone of us who have found ourselves vacillating when caught between a rock and a hard place, between something we really, really want, and something we should really, really, not have or do. If you have never weaseled out of something, God bless you, but for those of us who have this passage can strike close to home.

It's not that we start off with bad intentions, Herod Antipas liked to listen to John the Baptist. He was intrigued by him yet perplexed by his words The wonder is that Herod liked to listen to John even after he had imprisoned him for John's public rebuke about his marriage to Herodias.

Herod had succumbed to lust for Herodias who was both his niece and the wife of his brother. Herodias had divorced her husband to marry Herod and Herod had divorced his wife to marry Herodias. Most of us are not going to be tangled in such a dramatic dysfunctional family dynamic but sometimes we get ourselves into situations where we should have known better. The moral boundaries were clear, and this marriage was a big no-no according to Mosaic law. John, calling for repentance of sin was relentless in denouncing it. Herodias was angered by John's preaching and wanted to kill him.

The opportunity for revenge came at Herod's birthday party, when Herod, entranced by the dancing of his daughter/niece promises her whatever she wants., including half his kingdom. Here we come to another questionable decision on Herod's part – in fact, he did not have a kingdom and what he did have was not his to give, merely to govern. So, what's a little bombast and boasting when you sin publicly? Have you never claimed more than who or what you truly are? Have you never flaunted your power or position?

When Herod's daughter asks her mother what to request, her mother responds, "the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

Once again, Herod is between a rock and a hard place. Have you never made a promise you did not keep? Have you never acquiesced to something that wasn't right for fear of public exposure?

He had protected John "knowing he was a holy and righteous man". Now he risked ignoring his wife and, more important going back on the oath he had sworn when his daughter had finished her dance. Going back on his oath in front of the elite of Galilee. Fear of shame can be a more powerful motivator than guilt. Herod orders the beheading of John the Baptist. His sin here is twofold. Herod kills an innocent man, a man whom he knew to be righteous and holy, and he boxed himself into this action because he had sworn an oath. Do you remember what Jesus says about swearing oaths? *"But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black."* (Mat 5:34-36)

Elsewhere in the bible not all oaths are considered bad, just the ones that are frivolous, or evil, or just plain stupid and unfortunately Herod's oath is all of these.

Sinning was a way of life for Herod. He exemplifies the abuse of power that is pervasive in the world, the careless decisions that have terrible consequences, careless decisions that lead to further bad decisions, and finally, the corrupting nature of sin itself...and we are vulnerable to all of these.

If we are left feeling tarnished by trying to reflect on our own sinfulness through the lens of Herod Antipas, remember that Herod had the chance to repent. Herod liked to listen to John, but Herod chose not to hear him. Herod chose to continue his sinful way of life. We who have chosen to follow Christ are guaranteed forgiveness of sins when we repent and turn to him. And that's a good thing because we cannot earn forgiveness, forgiveness is a gift bestowed by grace and given to us when we simply admit the wrong we have done.

In 1 Timothy we read, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1Ti 1:15)

In a few minutes when we say the general confession, we will acknowledge those things that we have done and those things that we have left undone. We will beg for mercy, forgiveness, and newness of life. Thanks be to God that Christ gave his church the authority to do so in his name. (BCP pg451) In the absolution we are assured that God will have mercy on us, forgive us all our sins through the mediation of Jesus Christ, and be strengthened in all goodness and through the power of the Holy Spirit be assured of eternal life.

Amen.