

## **What would you do if you were Herod? (July 15, 2018)**

Mark 6:14-29; Amos 7:7-15

The king Herod we are talking about this morning is not Herod the Great, the one who is known for ordering the Massacre of the Innocents at the time of the birth of Jesus, and his building projects throughout Judea, including the expansion of the second temple in Jerusalem, the building of the city and harbour at Caesarea, located between Tel Aviv and Haifa, and the fortress at Masada which later marked the end of the First Jewish-Roman War at 73 or 74 CE, with the mass suicide of 960 people there.

He is also not Herod II (27 BC – 33 AD), one of the sons of Herod the Great, the first Husband of Herodias.

The king Herod we are talking about is Herod Antipas (20 BC – after 39 AD), the half-brother of Herod II, the second husband of Herodias (15 BC – after 39 AD). He is best known today for his role in events that led to the executions of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.

The gospel of Mark describes Antipas as the one who gave orders to arrest and put John the Baptist in prison because he was trying to protect John from Herodias, who divorced herself from her first husband and married Antipas. Antipas knew that John was a righteous and holy man. He liked to listen to John, even when John told him that it's not lawful for him to marry his brother's wife.

According to the record of the Jewish historian Josephus, Antipas fell in love with Herodias when she was Herod II's wife. Antipas agreed to divorce his first wife, the daughter of Aretas, the King of Arabia Petrea. His first wife somehow knew about Antipas' affair and plan, so she requested Antipas to send her to the city Macherus, located near the border of the land belonging to Antipas and her father. Antipas didn't know that she was aware of his plan to divorce her and his marriage with Herodias, so he sent her to that city. At the same time, out of fear for John's influence on his people which might cause them to rebel against him, he sent John to Macherus, the same city where he sent his first wife and sentenced John to death. Josephus didn't mention the hatred of Herodias against John, but did mention a battle between the soldiers of Aretas, father of Antipas' first wife, and the soldiers of Antipas. Antipas was defeated in the battle. Josephus recorded that some Jews believed that Antipas' failure was from God since he killed John the Baptist.

After hearing the two brief descriptions about Herod Antipas from the Gospel of Mark and Josephus, I think we are all confused. Historically we can't confirm if Herodias played an active part in the death of John the baptist. However, as the King and the governor of a quarter of the province, Antipas should be held responsible for the death of John.

Was Antipas an emotional person who would do anything for his beloved and allow himself to listen to Herodias and her daughter Salome? Or was he a rational

person who took Herodias as his wife in order to make well use of Herodias' royal bloodline for the justification of his kingship over all Jewish people? One way or the other, Antipas played a more active role than Herodias and her daughter for the execution of John the Baptist.

In today's responsive reading, God let Amos see the vision of a plumb line among the people of Israel. The plumb line was held next to a wall which was supposed to be established vertically above the ground. If the wall was built according to what the plumb line showed, it would stand for a long time. The plumb line symbolizes a standard of right and wrong.

This message about the standard of right and wrong was delivered through Amos. However Amos was neither a professional prophet nor a disciple of the professional prophets. According to the standards of the professional prophets, all of them including Amaziah the priest of Bethel were supposed to support the king of Israel. They should deliver message of peace and not threat. However, Amos declared himself as not belong to that group of professionals. He cared only about tasks given by God.

The Gospel message of Mark this morning is also not entirely encouraging because John didn't deliver a supporting message but an alert message to Antipas. The cost of doing his job, telling the truth to the "power" was death.

A traditional challenge of today's passage usually stops at contemplating on the roles of Amos or John the Baptist, and the preparing oneself to face the subsequent persecution. However our world has changed and it keeps changing. In the past, Christians were not only persecuted but they have become a power that persecuted others. There are countries who consider themselves as Christian countries; there are political leaders who consider themselves as Christian leaders; there are also warfares which consider themselves as "Christian", or simply as "Holy". Is there actually a Christian mandate for all of these? If we were allowed to travel back in time and space to play the role of Antipas, what could be done differently? Would you as Antipas, reconsider your marriage with Herodias? Was it for love, for politics, or for both? Would you respond differently to an entertainment performed by Salome that impressed you so much that you considered giving up half of your kingdom, or you were just using it as an excuse to pursue your political agenda?

We know we are not time-travellers, but these questions help us to reflect on our Christian mandate: Are we prepared to speak the truth no matter what the cost would be? And who are our mentors?

The higher the position we are holding, the more difficult it becomes for us to make decisions. Power, wealth, strategy do not always go against our Christian madates, but we need to grow spiritually in order to find the right path.

Whether we want to imagine yourselves as Antipas or not, we could still ask the following questions: Who are your mentors? Whose shoulders would you

“stand” or “lean” on? Who has inspired you? Was there a moment when you knew you had to continue the work that someone had already begun?

I have a story to share:

*High in the mountains of southeastern B.C., the conductor of a 25,000-tonne Canadian Pacific Railway freight train pulling 2.5 kilometers of cars loaded with potash got a bad feeling.*

*Headed west to Revelstoke, the train had just cleared a tunnel and was starting to build momentum downhill when he turned to the engineer, the man operating the massive vehicle, and said: “You know we’re tipping over here?”*

*Terrified the train was about to slide out of control down the mountain, the conductor flipped the emergency lever — overriding the engineer’s controls — bringing the train to a screeching stop before it could barrel towards catastrophe.*

*CBC agreed not to identify the conductor because he fears that he’d be fired for speaking out about what happened on the mountain last fall.*

CP workers said rookie engineers were ill-prepared for dangerous job. If you were the CEO of Canadian Pacific Railway, would you say “nobody’s gonna be forced to do anything” or “I’m not going to fire them” and yet forced them into the above situation?

There are times when we are moved to pray for those who have paid a costly price for revealing the truth or bringing justice. What would you do if you were Herod, if you were the one who has power? Think twice before any actions. Amen.