

Choices

Seventh Sunday after Trinity. Baptism and Holy Communion

Mark 6:14-29 also 2 Samuel 6:1-19.

This sermon has been inspired by a talk by Revd Rico Tice on the Christianity Explored Course...

We have celebrated the choice of Matthias and Lisette to bring Ziva for baptism, the choice to make promises in God's presence and Max, Elisabeth and Rebekah who have chosen to take on this privilege and commitment of being a godparent.

Choices? Have you ever looked back - thought back to one of those 'fork in the road' moments in life? In Dutch I think we call a fork in the road - *TSplitsing*. A moment when you wished you'd taken the other path, the other choice? Maybe it was something tiny - like you wished you'd gone to that **other** film last week. I've had a few of them! Or something bigger - like buying a second hand car that kept breaking down. Or a much larger decision - such as moving to live in another country, or changing job, that didn't work out...

There is a saying - "we are the choices we have made." Our Gospel reading - we are told the sad story of a man who, would have done anything to get out of the terrible situation his choices got him into. He was a man of great power, and yet someone else gained power over him...

1. **Herod's happiness**

Some people may have said Herod had it all. He was the king. A man of power. He lived in a palace. And his birthday guest list -

we read was full of "his high officials, military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee." Everything that brought him happiness was his - and what he didn't have, he took. He had taken his brother's wife - Herodias - Herod had visited his brother in Rome, seduced his wife, Herodias, and persuaded her to leave his brother and marry him. He broke the Jewish law in Leviticus and broke accepted norms of decency and morality. A man caught in sin and happily living as he wanted.

His birthday comes. Herodias daughter - known as Salome - came in and danced before Herod and his officials to entertain them. We heard "she danced and she pleased Herod and his dinner guests." (v22). It wasn't her skill as a dancer, or her clothing, solo dances were ones usually seen as seductive and normally what professional prostitutes would do. Herod and his guests enjoyed the dance and then he chose to show his power.

"Ask me for anything you want and I'll give it to you. Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

Herod makes it clear he has power - he repeats - ASK ME - he has the power to give. He shows his guests how much he enjoyed the dance. And how much he can afford to give away. He wants to impress the others with his generosity. But Salome doesn't answer.

She goes to her mother, her mother doesn't need to think twice what Salome should ask for...

2.Herod's Problems.

While that party was taking place, while Salome was talking to her mother, there was a man in the dungeons. He was in the dungeons of the fortress of Machaerus, which overlooked the

east side of the Dead Sea. John the Baptist. A man used to the wilderness and used to living off creation. Now imprisoned. John had come to prepare the way for the Messiah. His message - 'repent for the kingdom of God is near'. There was no one he wouldn't speak to - even a powerful adulterous king. It took courage to rebuke publically a king who had the power of life and death. Herodias did not like John "she nursed a grudge against him." for John had called sin sin and attacked their lifestyle. Herodias wasn't just angry at him - her plan - "she wanted to kill him." Her views were known, she wanted revenge.

Herod's problems. He couldn't control himself. He couldn't control his wife. He kept John in the dungeon. To keep him out her way. But also he didn't release him because it says "he liked to listen to him." (v20).

3. **Herod liked to listen**

We could think Herod didn't like to hear what John had to say anymore than Herodias. But he did. Why did he listen to him? Was it something about John telling him the truth while others told him what he wanted to hear? Herod maybe respected John for that. Years ago, in the rule of Saddam Hussein, there was an airforce officer George Sada, who rose to the rank of General and became part of the advisers around Saddam. George was a Christian. He did not respect George's faith. But he knew George would always give his opinion and say the truth, and not say what Saddam wanted to hear.

Herod knew John was real. He spoke the truth. He did not try to please Herod.

Were these the moments Herod would look back on, years later, maybe long he could return to and re do... those times he listened to John... Did Herod think about the choices he could have made?

Herod has two influences on his life - he is being pulled apart. They could not exist together. Herodias and John knew that. Herod was trying to find a way to have both. He wanted to hear the Word of God from John - even though it puzzled him / disturbed him - and he also wanted to disobey the Word of God, with Herodias. He was choosing to have both. His choices were pulling him apart.

Herod liked to listen to him. It says Herod saw John was "a righteous and holy man". And that he 'feared John and protected him', (v20).. He fears him, he listens to him, he knows he is a holy man, a righteous man, he shows this by protecting him. But if he knew John was God's man, a messenger, and he knew it was true what John said, why didn't he act on it.

Why didn't he choose to repent? He hesitated about John. He listened to John again and again. The right choice had knocked again and again and again on his door and he hadn't opened it...

4. Herod chose not to act.

Why? To suggest it was about all the good things he would have to give up. A person can reach a fork in the road. They know the way to go but the cost to go that way is too much. There is a desire to hold onto things.

Finally we read "the opportune time came" (v21).. It is the opportune time for Herodias as we heard. But it is a opportune time for Herod as well. Who will seize it?

Herod had made the offer. The girl had left. Maybe in all the drink, and conversation, he had already forgotten what he had said or offered. His guests maybe had. Or maybe they waited - longing to hear what this royal princess, this step daughter of Herod would ask. Maybe they were working out what the cost could be to Herod's personal fortune if she did ask for half the kingdom, or at least one of his fortress palaces... They didn't have long to wait...

"At once the girl hurried into the king with the request. I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a dish."

Herodias makes her choice. Her hatred for John is clear. We see that hatred inside Salome comes to her, Herodias has the chance for financial security / independence if Herod took another trip and took another wife. A wealthy woman in a few seconds. But she chooses to silence God's word in that fortress, in her husband's life, to take revenge.

Herod hears the words. He must have instantly sobered up. Did the officials go silent, were there cheers as they wanted rid of John to, or awkward laughter, expecting her to say something else? Herod is the most powerful man in that room. He can make any choice. But in the silence, nervous laughter or cheers, he knew he pushed into this position. The 'opportune time'. Sometimes we hear people say - about a life changing moment, when their whole life passed in front of them. This was a moment for Herod.

By the time Herod's glass was re filled after Salome finished the dance, his wife had seized the opportunity that came for her. His time has come.

Herod was "greatly distressed." . This mattered to him. He could have refused. But

"because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her."

He gave into the pressure to keep his foolish oath. It was the Power of Image. The anxiety of people laughing at him on the streets, saying 'he was the king who makes promises he cannot keep'. Fearing people would see him as weak to refuse. He'd lose respect of these commanders and leading men whom he invited. He gave in. He didn't act on what John had said. He now acts on what Herodias says. He felt forced - he was distressed, not joyful - to do something he had not wanted to do. He had John killed by an executioner that evening. He allowed the head that warned him, the tongue that told him to repent and receive God's forgiveness, to be literally cut off.

Herod feared John. But we heard. He feared his peers - friends, work colleagues, those around him - more. We may feel we are very different from Herod. But we all face pressure. When we seek to live out the teachings of Jesus, pressure comes. For us in the West. We can just imagine what friends colleagues, even family members will say if they hear we have stopped doing that or starting doing this. Will we deny and choose not to act because of what family will think? what business colleagues will do? Or what friends may say? Or we choose not to act because we know it will mean changing much loved habits?

Our OT scripture shows us another king. David. He seeks to bring the ark. He does not follow the law in how the ark is to be carried by Levities instead of being laid on a cart. He sins. Tragedy comes. Others suffer. He makes a wrong choice. He makes changes. He makes another choice. He repents - the word

means to change our attitude / behaviour, to change direction. He obeys the law. He doesn't matter if people question his judgement or even blame him for Uzzah's death. His focus is on doing the right thing by God. In fact his lack of care for what people think is illustrated in his dancing before the ark. He makes his choices for the Lord and doesn't matter what comes from that.

David. Makes a wrong choice. He takes the opportunity to change, to do things right.

Herod. He doesn't make a choice and so doing, makes a choice. It is a tragedy John lost his life. Herod's story is a tragedy.

We are the choices we have made. He failed to choose wisely and he lost something more precious, the opportunity to repent.

Pause

What choices are you facing at this time? What will shape what you will choose?

Let us pray...