

Address by Ash Leighton Plom at St David's & St Michael's Church, Exeter, for Sunday 11 July 2021

Our gospel reading today features one of the several stripteases in scripture, and always reminds me of an incident that happened when I led Exeter Street Pastors, helping people get home safely after nights out. One time, my team and I had stopped outside a strip club, and I suggested praying. I meant that we would pray, for example, for healthier relationships, not objectifying ones, and so on, and I started something like this:

"Lord, thank you for the women and men working in there. Help them, even tonight..." and I was going to continue with something like, "to find you and your good plan for each of their lives...", probably along the lines of other job opportunities, less exploitative and more wholesome, but my prayer got interrupted at that point by an urgent call over the radio, and so we had to stop praying and hurry to respond to wherever it was that we were needed. To this day, I sometimes wonder if my team thought I was just thanking God for the strippers, and asking him to help them that night with their dancing... just one of those awkward moments you can't really take back, I suppose.

Today I want to talk about Herod the Great, John the Baptist, and King David. The dance of Herodias junior for Herod the Great, and the subsequent beheading of John the Baptist, is one of those very famous incidents in scripture that we can be quite casual about, perhaps because we hear it in church quite often, but we must keep in mind that it is actually a record of a tyrant's vile abuse, a man died, and many felt the consequences.

Despite its familiarity for many of us, I do believe we can still find much in it for application. Note, for example, the wild notions that the people had about Jesus; he was becoming famous for doing miracles, and they thought that he might be the prophet Elijah raised from the dead, or John the Baptist, whom Herod himself had killed. They were willing to believe all sorts of speculation, but not the truth of who he is, which is a sad thing we see today, too.

And notice that they were open at this time to the possibility that a man could be killed, raised from the dead and go about doing miracles. Yet three years later, when this very thing happened – Jesus was killed, raised from the dead, and went about doing miracles – they didn't believe it. Napoleon once said, "People will believe anything you tell them, as long as it isn't in the Bible"!

We might notice, too, Herod's guilty conscience: it torments him into imagining that John whom he had killed was back to haunt him. This is almost Shakespearian, Macbeth-like, in its pointed commentary: a person's guilty conscience can haunt them, and so those who want to keep their minds at peace should keep their consciences clean. (C.f. Acts 24:16, "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man")

John had boldly rebuked Herod for marrying his brother's wife, against both Leviticus 18 and 20 in the Torah, the Old Testament Law. John clearly preferred the

risk of earthly punishment to slacking off in his heavenly duty. Sometimes, to be faithful to God, we must not be afraid of the offence of people. Like John the Baptist, and like the apostles Peter and John on trial in Acts, may we remember that we serve God, not people. (Acts 5.29) As Martin Luther put it, “I would not give one moment of heaven for all the joy and riches of the world.”

Herod, on the other hand, makes himself a servant of his own lusts and the manipulators around him, instead of being a servant of God. We find a contrast between Herod and David in our two readings today. David, of course, not always morally perfect, and a sinner like the rest of us, but today we find him glorifying God, even at the expense of the respect of his wife.

Having defeated the Philistines, today we see him bringing the ark of God to Jerusalem, so that it might be a blessing to him and his people. The ark had first been made during the Exodus but had been neglected for a long time, in part due to war with pagan tribes. And so the writer, probably Nathan or Gad, describe the ark with great words. It is often timely to remind ourselves to speak highly of God and the things he honours, for example the sacraments, which are for us somewhat like the ark was to ancient Israel, a physical sign of God’s presence.

Thus it is with great joy that David receives the ark into his home, and it is with great joy that we can receive the sacrament shortly. David and others with him were musically skilled, and they played and sang and danced to express their joy. Some scholars suppose that it was on this occasion that David wrote Psalm 68, because it begins with an ancient prayer about moving the ark.

Either way, David himself danced before the Lord with all his might, transported with worship. The difference between Herod and David, here, is that David’s joy is in God, not people, so much so that he didn’t care what people thought of his worship, even his wife. He’s more like his fellow prophet John the Baptist than his fellow king, Herod, in that his focus is his relation with God first and foremost.

And so we should perform our worship and service for God: all our might is still too small an offering, when we think what Christ offered for us on the cross.

We’ve had reason to rejoice at various moments this last year as lockdown measures eased and we’ve been freer to worship. And I know PCC covet your prayers ahead of our meeting this week to discuss the 19th July easing, and how to free worship up even more, while still remaining safe.

I love how the 2 Samuel reading ends with the ark safely brought to a place prepared for it, public and accessible. David and the people joined in worship – even young people who might never have seen the ark before! Why? Well, they had heard that Obed-edom had been blessed by it, and so they wanted to experience this themselves. So too can your story of your experience of what you gain from the faith be the encouragement someone else, maybe some young person needs to hear today. Invite them to church, in person or online. They too can be like these Israelites, rediscovering a lost sacrament.

Those who have received from God should share - and so we should all share God with others. We have more opportunities now than ever to invite friends, colleagues, neighbours, family members to church, whether online or onsite, so have a think who and be sure to share an invite to church with someone this week, and maybe very soon you'll be able to introduce them to me over coffee or outside after a service. Thanks be to God.