

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Sermon from: Mark 6: 14-29

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July 11, 2021

The lesson from this week's Gospel of Mark brings us closer to a puzzling text – a text as complicated as life itself.

The confrontation between John the Baptist and Herod Antipas is one of the stories that we wish we could avoid at all costs. And with all the reason in the world.

The Gospels agree that there – in front of John's eyes – Rabbi Jesus' public ministry begins. In Mark chapter 6, we read about the complicated story surrounding the death of one of the most impactful figures in Jesus' ministry. Jesus was convinced that John, a man dressed in animal skins with a rustic and rough appearance, was an envoy and prophet of God. And so strong is the conviction, that Jesus asks John to baptize Him in the Jordan River.

The Gospel of Mark opens with these words: "Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you to prepare your way"(1:1-2). The messenger was John the Baptist (1:3-11). John prepared the way by preaching a baptism of repentance to receive forgiveness of sins (1:4). After the arrest of John (which sets the stage for the beginning of Jesus' ministry), Jesus came to Galilee preaching the same message, "Repent, and believe in the good news " (1:14-15).

The Mission of the Twelve (6:6b-13) brings us to this account of John's martyrdom, but Mark concludes the story of the mission (6:30) right after telling us about the tragic death (6:14-29). He embeds the narrative of martyrdom within the story of the mission for a reason. The disciples' mission is quite successful (6:12-13), and he assures us that God's work will continue even despite the martyrdom of one of his greatest servants. Being under great persecution, the church in the community for which Mark writes needed to hear something like this. We, too, need to hear it because, like God's people throughout the centuries, we often interpret difficult times as a sign that evil has triumphed over God.

This story has another purpose. The death of John and that of Jesus warn us that God does not always reward faithful disciples with an easy life. Christian prophets can be beheaded, crucified, thrown to lions, expelled from universities, fired from a job, or left to face other difficult realities. The path of the prophets who tell the truth is often full of trials.

So it is clear that this episode inserted by Mark in this part of the Gospel has a final intention: to indicate that the fate of Jesus would run its course. For this very reason, he

continues with the narrative that he has been developing. John is arrested and beheaded for revealing and denouncing the corruption of the rulers and for calling everyone to an authentic conversion. Jesus also denounces the civil and religious rulers of his time, and for this he is condemned to crucifixion.

Historians have told us that the Herodian dynasty was not exactly the most upright and honest of the first century; it was characterized by ambition, unscrupulousness, cruelty and corruption. John, like Jesus and the first Christians, had to suffer much under the Herodian government. This makes us understand that fidelity to the Gospel results in persecution and death.

As we have observed, this is a story that unites faith and practice. The Church's convictions about the person of Jesus Christ must be translated into action in the world. The great purpose of the Church and Christians is to follow the example of Jesus and proclaim Him living.

But are we willing to follow Jesus regardless of where our faith takes us?

Following Jesus implies an ethical commitment. The confession is not merely confession by mouth. Faith in Jesus is maintained in prayers and songs, and it is a fundamental part of our response to God; our worship must translate into a lifestyle committed to the full goodness of every human being in this world created by God.

The important thing about the prophet John was not his predictions, his coarseness, or even his death as told by Mark, but rather the fact that even in the most adverse moments, John remained faithful to the end. And here the end was not final in the absolute sense. John's detractors believed that beheading him would silence the voice of God in the world. How wrong they were! The God that John put his faith in transcends tragedy, death, and the powers of this world.

Oftentimes we prefer stories with a happy ending. We all would like the world to be simple, and we wish all situations would resolve with an easy and simple solution. But Mark reminds us today that real life, as lived by men and women of faith, is full of joys and also complex events that can test our concept of a God who is all about love and justice.

We here in our social reality are not threatened with death. But rather we are invited to live a life committed to spreading the Good News of salvation through our words and deeds. There will be times when we will also have to denounce evil where it exists. We will do it with brave words, but above all with a faithful life that itself is like a prophetic sign in the middle of a world that pursues human values that are not right or a world that raises altars to false gods that produce unhappiness, injustice and lack of love and cooperation between all human beings.

The Gospel of last Sunday already reminded us of this, as the Gospel of today reminds us. We are all called to be prophets. But being a prophet is not easy sometimes. It leads us to reflect on God's love and mercy for all.

Today let us remember those who have been prophets here and in other lands. We know their names, the men and women who have been for us a faithful example of God's love for every human being, but more than that, we must learn from their example. Jesus invites us today to believe because everything is possible for those who believe. Have faith and patience, and above all, let us go to into the world in peace and be witnesses and prophets of hope. The rest will be done by God Our Father who can turn our worries and sorrows into joy.

Let us pray today in our Eucharist:

Lord, make me steadfast in the faith. Grant me the courage in the face of difficulties. Make me overcome the human respect that prevents me from bearing witness to you before the world.

Make me not hesitate before the duty to choose, grant me, Lord, the strength to stand on the side of John the Baptist, on the side of true life. Make me have nothing but your Word in my heart. Amen.