

Standing For The Truth

How familiar are you with Christchurch Park in Ipswich? CHRISTCHURCH MANSION It's a park that's more than just about leisure, but reflects the history of the town; the wonderful Christchurch Mansion, being its centrepiece, but have you ever noticed this memorial just up the footpath from the Mansion near the Round Pond. Do you know what is doing there? MEMORIAL

It's the IPSWICH MARTYRS' MEMORIAL. It was put there only about 120 years ago, to commemorate the Lollard and Protestant people who were burnt at the stake at the Cornhill during the Tudor period. OLD PIC. Seven of the martyrs on the memorial were Protestants who were arrested during the reign of Mary 1st (PICS 1-3). They were horribly tortured to get them to recant their faith and when they didn't were burnt at the stake. The memorial also remembers two martyrs killed during Henry VIII's reign who were Lollards; people who were followers of John Wycliffe who actively campaigned for the translating of the Bible into English. They were burned at the stake in the years prior to Henry's break with Rome.

The Christian faith has a long history of martyrs: people who paid the ultimate price for being a Christian and as we heard about earlier in the service, that's still the case in many countries today. It takes a brave person to stand up to the forces of a despotic state whether they are Christians or not. TITLE PIC Here's a picture of the man that stood up to the Chinese tanks dispersing people at Tiananmen Square in 1989. The day previous, the People's Liberation Army had massacred at least 2000 people protesting against Chinese repression in the Square. No-one knows who this brave man was who stood up to the tanks that day or whether or not he is still alive.

KIMS Here are a family of modern despots that jail Christians, torture them in work camps and execute them. They remind me of the royal dynasty in our reading this morning – the (A FISTFUL OF) HERODS. Many of the males went by the family name of Herod. Those at the top of the family had no compunction about killing opponents, including their nearest and dearest. Herod the Great for example executed his oldest son, murdered his second and third, disinherited his fourth and the final three all became minor monarchs or tetrarchs after his death in 4BC.

Unlike the Kims, who are isolationist, the Herods kept themselves in power by doing the bidding of their imperial masters in Rome who gave them authority to act on their behalf and turned a blind eye to their excesses as long as the purposes of Rome were served. They even had their own political party, the Herodians who tried to win the Jews around to accepting Herodian rule in the Tetrarchies. Here's a MAP of where the Tetrarchs ruled at the time of the Gospels and what happened to them.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

And that's the background to our reading today. John the Baptist is imprisoned and martyred by Herod Antipas. The crime? He publicly spoke out against Herod, particularly his marriage to Herodias, who had been married to his older brother Herod II, also known as Philip (he also had a younger brother called Philip the Tetrarch). Herodias has been described by some as the Jezebel of the Gospels. She was ambitious and wanted power and influence which she wasn't going to get with Philip who had been effectively disinherited. We are not sure who divorced who, but she ended up marrying Antipas in her lust for power. On the other hand Antipas divorced his first wife to marry Herodias which suggested adultery being involved between himself and Herodias. His marriage to Herodias may have been legal under Roman law but it wasn't under Jewish law.

Now Antipas, like his father, was keen to project himself as the “King of the Jews” as he controlled two Jewish areas and still tried to exert influence in Jerusalem, even though it was under the control of Roman Procurator, Pontius Pilate by this time which caused issues.

Part of John’s ministry was to challenge the existing authorities, particularly their departure from the Law and their lack of integrity. They should repent – the Messiah was coming! Previously we heard his criticism of the Jewish religious leaders from Jerusalem, but now his criticism was being firmly aimed at the “King of the Jews” and his lack of integrity in marrying Herodias. She was incensed and got Herod to arrest him with a view to execution.

Mark’s Gospel shows us how hesitant Herod was. He knew that John was a righteous and holy man and he wanted to hear him a little more. If the Messiah was coming, then what? That was a worry for him. In Matthew’s Gospel it also adds that he was afraid of public outcry if he executed John.

Of course angry Herodias waited for her moment to pounce. A birthday party, a beautiful dance by his stepdaughter, too much wine and a rash promise from Herod; and it was all over and John lost his head. Herodias persuaded her daughter to ask for his head on a plate. Herod couldn’t get out of his rash promise because it would mean he would lose face with his guests. John’s fate was sealed. It was suggested once by an African Pastor that a solution that may have worked would be to have said that John the Baptist wasn’t in the half of the kingdom he was promising!

It was a sad end to John as we see him a victim to the pride and vengefulness of Herodias in particular. We see those same attitudes from other sets of people when we read of the trial and execution of Jesus, and still see them in stories of persecution today. Times may change but human sin doesn’t and we see the persecution of John the Baptist repeated and repeated and repeated, and will continue to do so until the Lord comes. Let’s consider the three people directly responsible for John’s death as their behaviour reveals the kinds of attitudes that lead to persecution.

HEROD – Pride and Power

Herod was in power. To yield to John’s criticism and repent would have hit his pride and diminished his power. He was “King of the Jews” (well some of them as his territory covered about half of Jewish majority lands) and to have actively sought the Messiah would have been an acceptance that he wasn’t. National or regional level persecution is frequently in lands where power is held by despotic individuals like Kim Jong-un or repressive ideological systems such as in China where there is no room for an alternative world view that would diminish the regime or expose it for what it is. Open Doors believes that of the 400,000 Christians believed to be in North Korea, 20% are in work camps and the rest need to lie very low as they risk imprisonment and even death for revealing they are Christians.

HERODIAS – entitled and vengeful

In recent years we have imported an American use of a well known word – entitled. It’s when a person feels entitled to act how they please because of who they are. Herodias sought influence and power by marrying the then most powerful of the Herods however illegitimately that may have been done. Because she considered herself entitled because of her wealth and family links, that she could sweep John away by fair means or foul. Much persecution of Christians occurs because somebody has a sense of entitlement that allows them to discriminate against and

persecute Christians. It's worst where religion is involved as the OD video showed earlier.. Extreme Islam works on the basis that their god somehow not only absolves them, but encourages them to brutalise and murder away all those who are different from them or criticise them. The same is true of extreme Hinduism.

SALOME – an airhead

According to Jewish historian Josephus, the daughter of Herodias from her first marriage was called Salome and she was the one who asked for the head of John the Baptist on a plate. Salome allowed herself to be led by her mother to have John beheaded. Did she feel any particular animosity to John? We don't know. Probably not – she just did as she was told to please her mother. Her obedience to Herodias almost breathtaking as Salome could have literally claimed half of Herod's kingdom, yet she allowed Herodias to manipulate her.

Incidents during the past two years have shown how easy it is for extremists and unscrupulous politicians to spread lies about a wide range of issues, and how easy it seems to get people to turn it into a popular movement. Whether that is ISIS, anti-vaxxers, Trumpists or racists, some really obnoxious ideas have found traction, particularly in American society. Anti-Christian sentiment is often spread by disinformation through social media, the tabloid media or conspiracy theories.

Faced with a world where OD believes that 73% of Christians are under some sort of restrictions or persecution, what can we do? There are two things that spring straight to mind.

1. We can pray.
2. We can use our freedom to support organisations like OD, BMS or IJM to stand against those who discriminate against or persecute Christians. Our freedom also allows us to lobby our own Government to act. You've got freedom – use it while we have it.

But even though we are in a country full of freedoms, I believe the story of John the Baptist leaves us with three warnings.

PREPARE OURSELVES FOR OPPOSITION even in our land.

We should be prepared for opposition from those who would seek to share Jesus with them or with other people. We think that it is the greatest message on Earth, but to those that don't understand the message it will be regarded as irrelevant, or superstition, or nonsense. We live in one of the least Christian societies in the world. Committed Christians now make up less than 5% of the population and we should expect criticisms of our teachings and lifestyle to become more common in the future. At the moment Christians punch above their weight in exerting social influence – many important charitable ventures have Christian foundations – but how long will that last? We are a minority – but we still have the most important words of life that the Lord calls us to share.

Let me give you a verse from 1 Corinthians 1:23 where Paul says this VERSE *“we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”* We all know that there are those out there who take offence at us when we try to reach out, there are others who think it's nonsense. And that puts many Christians off even admitting they are Christians. What if I get an angry response, what if I'm laughed at, ridiculed, made to look stupid? You may – it comes with the territory - if people could be offended by and mock the Son of God when He walked the Earth, then we stand no chance at all.

But consider this....

SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE

... for as many who are offended by us or ridicule the Christian faith – there are millions more who don't have strong reactions to Christians and are open to the Good News – we now live in an unchurched society where the Christian faith may engender questions rather than hostility. How can we reach them and connect? Pray about it, pray for your friends and neighbours who need to know Jesus and ask Him for those opportunities to have conversations and to be the hands and feet of Jesus to them. Here's what Peter says in his first letter:

VERSE Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect 1 Peter 3:15

Never write anyone off. What was interesting about Herod was that even though Herodias wanted John's head on a platter, Herod wanted to learn more, and after the death of John, he was completely freaked out when he heard of Jesus because he thought that He John had been raised from the dead! Was he coming to get him? John didn't have an opportunity to further anything with Herod because he was executed. In the same position decades later, Paul was imprisoned in Rome and did get the opportunity to share Christ with his jailers and the Emperor.

DON'T DO THE SAME AS OUR PERSECUTORS OR CRITICS

Which leads me to a word of warning. One feature of the Ipswich Martyrs monument, is that these brave people lost their lives to persecutors who claimed that they were Christians. Take a look at these pictures too: burn a Koran day, God hates fags. Do we believe that the purpose of extending the Kingdom of God is served by insulting those with beliefs different to ours, religious or otherwise? They cause their targets to become irate. Extreme Muslims may try to murder Christians in retaliation.

What are we called to do with all those who don't know Christ? What does God want to do with them. *VERSE The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* 2 PETER 3:9

His desire is that they don't perish but come to repentance. Any dialogue that doesn't have that behind it shouldn't happen. Yes, there are those who are always offended by Christians and those that always laugh. Our task must always be their redemption. And it can be done. Here's that verse we had earlier: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect* 1 Peter 3:15. One of the most fertile grounds in evangelism at the moment is amongst Muslims. How does that happen? By treating them with gentleness and respect. Muslims love talking about their faith and are intrigued by ours. Actually the same is true of everyone we come across with views very different to ours. We are here to make disciples, not enemies.

John gave his life to bring news of the coming Messiah to others. His message was powerful and Jesus the Messiah was even more powerful than him. Our message is that powerful message. It has already brought millions and millions into God's kingdom through faith in the risen Christ. In this post Covid world, the need of the human race remains the same, the answer remains the same, the power remains the same – let's go forward in confidence in this uncertain world, bringing certainty into people's lives through Christ – Jesus Christ; the same, yesterday, today and forever.

TITLE

PRAYER

For Reflection and Discussion

Read Mark 6:14-29

1. John got himself jailed by calling out Herod and Herodias for their lack of integrity. Can you think of any examples in the modern world where Christians have got themselves into hot water for standing against civil authorities?
2. Because we live in a society where people are allowed to speak out and demonstrate their views, and try to change public opinion, Christians have an opportunity to be part of lobby groups and demonstrations. Where do we draw the line as to how far we are prepared to get involved? How does your faith play a part in that?
3. Read 1 Peter 3:15. Why is this verse so important when we share Jesus with people who have beliefs very different to ours?
4. How do we deal with people who always take offence to our being a Christian or who think we are nuts?