

Scripture:
Mark 6:14-29

“Decisions, pressure, judgement calls!”

Jesus has sent out His disciples and together they have been doing amazing things.

Preaching the repentance of sins ----- driving out demons --- anointing and healing the sick --- and so on.

Kingdom of God work ---- living out the gospel.

And this has caught everybody off guard.

How can Jesus do this?

And how can He give others the abilities and power to do these as well?

And so this is the context of our gospel passage today ---- confusion as Jesus and His recently selected disciples minister to those in need.

The opening of our passage today ---- “King Herod heard about this --- for Jesus’ name had become well known. Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.

Other said “He is Elijah.”

And still others claimed, “He is a prophet like one of the prophets of long ago.”

But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead.”

There’s confusion --- and uncertainty ---- surrounding Jesus and His disciples.

Jesus is doing miraculous things ---- people are wondering where on earth did He get the power to do such things.

And they are so confused that they wonder if He is John the Baptist resurrected ---- or Elijah come back again.

Herod too is confused by all of this wondering ----- in verse 16 --- “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead.”

John has already been killed ---- beheaded by Herod --- and here Jesus --- after having been discounted in His home town --- is going about doing miraculous things --- and people don't know what to think.

“Is it John the Baptist come back to life --- has Elijah returned?”

“What's going on here --- because Jesus the carpenter --- son of Joseph certainly couldn't ever do the things this man is doing.”

And of course that's precisely what is happening ----- Jesus is doing things that they never thought possible ---- at least not by little old Him --- the carpenter's son from Nazareth.

And so in the confusion of what is going on --- how Jesus can do what he is doing ---- people wondering if he is John the Baptist come back to life after having been killed by Herod ---- we get the details of just how John the Baptist was actually killed some time before this.

And anyone who ever thought that the Bible isn't relevant --- or is outdated and no longer helpful or relevant in a post modern --- social media ---- technology driven culture --- never took the time to read scripture carefully - -- or entirely.

Here in Mark's gospel today we have some of the most relevant challenges we will ever face in our lifetime.

We have circumstances that are cross cultural --- circumstances that apply to every age and every time and every person -- at sometime or another in life.

And they come to us in a very scandalous --- messy ---- passionate set of circumstances.

No thriller --- romance --- mystery --- or action narrative of today could ever be more real ----- truthful ---- and raw as what we have in Mark's gospel today.

A man marries his sister in law --- who by the way is also his niece ----- gets boozed up a bit at a big state party ---- watches a beautiful young girl dance for Him --- and gets all caught up in the moment --- sexually aroused even some have argued ----- and then makes a very poor choice --- promising this young dancing girl that he will give her anything she wants --- including up to half of his kingdom.

Anything she wants --- up to and including half his kingdom ---- just because he liked her way of dancing.

And to top it all off ---- this dancer who catches his interest so ---- is also his niece --- his brother's daughter ----- and now also his very own step daughter as he has just married his brother's wife ----- but not before casting off his first wife ----- the princess of Nabataean.

This whole set of scandalous ---- messy --- passionate circumstances enables us to reflect on the very same situations and behaviours that we are often faced with in our lives.

Situations --- behaviours --- circumstances --- realities ----- such as ---

How do life's pressures affect our judgement?

What can we learn from this story of a king who caved in to social pressures?

What can we learn from this king who was at times driven to a fault by personal desire --- and maybe even lust?

Here we see that ---- puzzling problems require conscientious decisions.

Here we see that ---- promises made in haste can come back to haunt us.

We see that pressures in life can affect good judgement --- and cause us to make short term --- passionate --- not very well thought our promises.

Maybe we shouldn't ever make a promise without first considering what it might cost us --- beyond just the moment?

And so on ----- to name but a few of the realities that this recounting of the beheading of the John the Baptist brings to the forefront.

If we ever need a reminder that only Jesus saves ---
 ----- that only Jesus heals ----
 --- that sometime life is extremely messy and we do some stupid things
 --- that sometimes we make poor decisions
 --- decisions that we are not able to fix ourselves --- this is it.

There is no great moral conclusion or pithy advice to this story ---- it's a messy story that ends badly.

Like Herod ----- pressure --- and passion ---- influence our decisions --- precisely because we're human.

Sometimes we make quick and less than faithful judgement calls that can get us into a whole lot of trouble --- causing us great grief and embarrassment.

Herod wasn't all that happy with what John had to say to him.

John basically told Herod that what he was doing was wrong.

John the Baptist had the backbone and moral fortitude to do what no one else would do ---- but what many were no doubt thinking ----- tell Herod that what he was doing was wrong ---- marrying his brother's wife.

Verse 18 --- "For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

And then the next verse --- "So Herodias ----- Herod brother's wife ----- the woman Herod just married ---- nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was unable to."

And she was unable to because of her husband ---- the one who in the end ironically ---- has John the Baptist killed ---- despite trying to protect him and save him from certain death.

And we know this because the very next verse says so --- "because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man.

When Herod heard John he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.”

“because Herod feared John and protected him...”

Herod put John in prison to protect him --- so that his wife wouldn't be able to kill him off --- as she so desired.

Herod knew John was righteous and Holy.

Herod also knew his new wife despised him and wanted to kill him.

So he thought ----- “I'll imprison him ---- and protect him ---- saving him from certain death ----- and at the same time my imprisoning him will not only protect him ----- but likely appease my wife as well --- it'll look like I'm doing something to honour her.

Unfortunately Herod got a little carried away one night and made a promise that he felt he couldn't go back on.

He was the king ----- or at least the person in the highest position of authority in the land.

Why couldn't ---- why didn't he simply say to Herodias' daughter ----- “I know I said you could have anything but -----asking for the head of John the Baptist is too much ---- I meant you could have any material things --- possession --- not human life.”

“Asking for John's head is asking for too much --- I will not kill this Holy and righteous man --- regardless of what I just promised you --- because killing him is wrong ---- so what else would you like my dear child.”

He couldn't --- or at least didn't say something like this ---- because of social pressure.

Social pressure.

This all took place ----- according to verse 21 --- in the presence of his high officials --- military commanders ----- and the leading men of Galilee.

Herod didn't want to appear in the presence of all the people of influence and authority as a welcher --- as someone who went back on his word --- as weak or untrustworthy.

He promised this young girl anything ----- anything up to half his kingdom - ---- and so that is what he had to give ---- including the head of this Holy and righteous innocent man.

Scandal --- intrigue ----- passion ---- lust ----- following through on promises --- the sometimes unfortunate messiness of life.

The stuff of real life is precisely what the Bible is all about.

Herod had made some bad decisions ---- he had made some judgement calls ----- and here there was a lot of pressure on him.

He decided he wanted his brother's wife --- so he sent his current wife away ---- she was the princess of Nabataean ----- this later led to military defeat when the King of Nabataean ---- not impressed with how his daughter was treated ---- defeats Herod in battle.

His new wife wanted a Holy and righteous man whom he liked killed --- she nursed a grudge against him and wanted him killed verse 19 says so bluntly.

Herod makes a decision ----- one that certainly would have included a significant amount of pressure from his wife.

Herod makes a decision to imprison this man to protect him and also to try to satisfy his angry wife.

Herod gets a little tipsy --- and then carried away a bit at the party ---- and promises the dancer --- his new step daughter --- and also niece --- up to half of his kingdom.

The young girl doesn't know what to ask for so she confers with her mother --- Herod's new wife.

And her mother wasting no time --- seizes the opportunity to kill John the Baptist --- telling her daughter to ask for John's head on a platter right here - -- right now ----- tonight.

And so the young girl does.

And Herod caving in to pressure --- honouring his promise --- being true to his word --- making a stupid choice --- not having the sense to clear up his quick lipped passionate promise ----- however you want to look at it ---- honours her request.

And off comes John's head.

How do life's pressures affect us?

Do we give in to social pressures?

Do we stick to our word no mater what --- even if our word was perhaps ridiculous and ill conceived to begin with?

Do we ever react hurriedly?

Do we ever react harshly?

Do we listen to counsel or ask for things that if we thought about it for ourselves for a minute would soon realize it wasn't the best thing to do or ask for?

Have we ever been short sighted?

Or so passionately caught up or committed to something ----- that we loose sight of the bigger picture?

Are there ever circumstances that dictate we ought to go back on promises made in haste? --- willing to face living with but you said so --- changing our mind for a greater faithfulness?

If so --- under what circumstances? --- and why?

These are some of the questions the gospel confronts us with today.

It can sometimes be easy to see how pressures in life ----- or passions in life can affect good judgement.

What can we do when caught between a rock and a hard place ----- what criteria do we use in making decisions --- judgement calls ---- in the most difficult of circumstances?

Sometimes it can be easy to see things in others that we consider faults --- but in ourselves we write off as pressure --- or --- having no choice.

We can get ourselves into messes --- and have to make loaded decisions.

Have to make quick judgement calls that will cause us great grief and loss any way we choose ---- even when we truly try to live a good and faithful --- - gospel driven Christ inspired life.

The good news is -----

---- God accepts this

--- God knows this ----- that's why He sent Jesus Christ.

We will mess up --- we will not only find ourselves in --- but we will also create --- unintentionally --- and sometimes even unbeknown to us at all ---- dreadfully sinful messes ----- and we can do no other.

No matter how good and faithful we think we are ---- and may even actually be ----- we are all ---- in varying degrees for sure ----- but we are all --- mess makers ---- sinners.

God knows this --- God accepts this --- and God still and forever always loves us.

And God also knows that left to ourselves we cannot right or fix some of the messes we make and sins we commit.

Herod was in such a pickle in Mark's gospel today --- there was just no way out.

Whatever he does ---- in the end will be a disaster.

No matter what he does he will frustrate and anger people ---- there is no way he can do that which pleases everybody.

There are situations in life that no matter what we do will be a disaster ---- that's why we have Christ.

That's why God sent Jesus --- to save us from disaster ----- to rescue us from sin having any kind of final and lasting say.

Herod is in a pickle ----- he's in a hopeless situation --- ruined --- there is no good way out of his predicament.

Thankfully there is Christ.

Thankfully there is Christ when we are in such a pickle ---- that things seem and even are --- as they sometimes can be ----- hopeless without Him.

If ever we need a reminder that only Jesus is capable of making all the right decisions all the time.

If ever we need a reminder that only Jesus saves and heals --- and that we will not ---- and cannot earn our way into heaven by always doing what is right and making all the right moves and decisions in life --- it's here in Mark's gospel today with Herod.

Life can be complicated and messy --- we will mess up --- we will find ourselves in hopeless situations --- we may even mistakenly create hopeless situations --- hopeless save for Christ.

Thankfully --- regardless of the outcome ----- there is Jesus Christ waiting for us ---- forgiving us --- cleansing us ---- saving us.

Decisions.

Pressure.

Judgment calls.

We all have critical decisions --- extreme pressure -- and pressing judgement calls at some point or another in our lives ---- that's just the nature of life.

Thankfully we all also have forgiveness ---- new life ----- redemption --- and salvation ---- thanks to Jesus Christ ---- and this too is the very nature of life.

At its core ----- life is not about what we can do --- or have done.

It's about whose we are --- children of God.

We can't earn --- or decide our way into God's eternal presence --- for that we need Christ --- God's grace in Jesus Christ.

This story in Mark's gospel today isn't about what to do in tricky situations - -- what not to do --- how to avoid tricky situations ----- and so on.

There's no tidy little set of instructions or morality or ethics that sums up this very messy gospel story.

What this story leaves us with is the reality that sometimes there are messes that we can't earn --- decide ----- or work our way through --- sometimes things are very very messy.

And thankfully we have Christ --- that's why we have forgiveness --- God's grace.

Not because we're good enough but because God is gracious enough.

Real life is sometimes messy beyond repair ----- at least if left to strictly human devices.

And when real life gets really messy ----- this is precisely where we find Jesus alive and well --- present.

Healing --- reconciling --- redeeming --- always present.

And praise be to God for that.

What matters most in life --- isn't what happens to us ---- or even what we do.

What matters most in life --- is what has been done for us in Jesus Christ.

What matters most in life is whose we are.

Decisions ---- pressure --- judgement calls.

God is with us --- we are His ---- and He is ours.

All that truly matters has already been done for us in Christ.

Amen