

Disturbing the peace

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 14 July 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 8B

Contemporary Reading: from the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*

by Martin Luther King; Mark 6: 14-29

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Try as I might, I have always found John the Baptist to be an off-putting, and certainly a disturbing, figure in the Christian story. And I have tried. For I was ordained deacon in St John at Hackney, a church named after John the Baptist, and I served in the community there. Each year, we would have our patronal festival, and try to find ways to see how the Baptist could relate to our usual church life. To be honest, it was easier than in the past. For St John at Hackney was originally a very high society church – indeed, the focal borough church in Hackney - and its impressive churchyard still contains many notable figures, such as the Baden Powell family, from whom the worldwide scouting movement issued.

By the 1980s however, Hackney was both London's poorest and most multicultural borough, and our congregation was very different; all part of the Anglican Church's journey in the inner cities from being the church of *'the great and the good'* to being one of the *'marginal and the odd'*. Over half of our congregation also drew their origins from West Africa or the West Indies. Well, maybe John the Baptist might have felt somewhat at home, being on the prophetic margins of his society. Yet his appearance and demeanour would still have marked him out. Indeed, even some of the more radical and vibrant of our congregation would have struggled with some of his language of repentance and its tone.

Similarly, I suspect that we would not be wholly comfortable with him here. For John the Baptist was most certainly a *'disturber of the peace'* in very uncomfortable ways. Indeed, the story of his violent death we heard this morning is hardly the most attractive within the Bible. So what do we make of it, and of the Baptist's significance within our faith journey?

Today's Gospel story is hard to read as *'good news'*. There is no obvious sliver of redeeming light here. Rather it is highly tawdry and brutal reality. It is possible to be distracted from this by later lurid portrayals of the story as well as by later piety. Indeed, when looking for an image for the front of the liturgy sheet, I encountered a huge number of dramatic scenes: various gruesome human heads, dripping with various quantities of blood, and portrayals of female figures in various degrees of lascivious dress. We would do well to temper our imaginations in this. As feminists, and other scholars, have pointed out, it is highly unlikely for example that, as a Judaeon princess, Herod's daughter would have been performing an erotic dance for subjects.

There is also some Western sexualising, and racial stereotyping, of the 'Orient' in our traditions. The Greek word used for Herod's daughter also often designates a small girl. For the point of the story is surely not that ethics can be distorted and violence can be inflicted by the rich and powerful in dramatic and extraordinary ways. Rather the point is that, every day and in very ordinary ways, ethics are corrupted and violence is inflicted as a matter of course, or by whim. And the point is that those who stand up, speak out, and act differently, will typically meet similar fates. If we are find hope and peace in this story, we therefore have to look a little deeper.

Down the ages, many have tried to avoid this story's bleak reality. Some scholars have tried to suggest it is but an interlude in the Gospel. One of the very few passages not to mention Jesus at all, it has also been argued that it is of little consequence: just tidying up the loose ends of Jesus' connection with his firebrand cousin. But this ignores the narrative brilliance of Mark's Gospel, and perhaps, understandably, it downplays the radical faith challenges involved.

Indeed, it is significant that Mark's account of the Baptist's death is far longer and more detailed than that in Matthew's Gospel. Luke and John meanwhile omit it altogether. The early Christians, like us, also clearly struggled with the uncomfortable nature of the Baptist and the implications of his life and death! They too found it hard to cope with the Baptist in their community and its story.

However, we cannot simply push him to one side. For Mark's Gospel is clear that John is not simply a forerunner of Jesus but that their two missions align and they bear similar challenges. No wonder then, that Herod thought that Jesus was a resurrected John. One vital feature of Mark's account is thus the utter humiliation of John's mission, and, by analogy, that of Jesus too. As Janice Capel Anderson observed in her article '*Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter*', it was at a woman's instigation that John died a very ignominious death in 1st Century culture. This, rather than imagined sexy dance moves, is at the heart of this story. In Anderson's words:

*To die in battle at the hands of enemy soldiers is honourable.
To be executed or to die at the hands of a woman is a mark of shame.*¹

Mark's account also portrays John's death in a different light to Matthew's Gospel. Herod is not a clear embodiment of evil in Mark. Unlike Matthew, where Herod is said to fear the people and wanted John killed, in Mark he is said to have been protecting John. Herod, in Mark's account, also ends up '*deeply grieved*', or *perilupos* in Greek: a word signifying wrenching sadness - which is only found here and to describe Jesus' feelings in Gethsemane. For this story illustrates three key uncomfortable elements in Mark's Gospel which are somewhat softened or ironed out in the other Gospels: namely tension, immediacy, and the call to disturbing faith in action. Let us reflect briefly on each of these three...

Firstly, tension:

Religious communities, politicians, and we humans as a whole, really do not like tension very much, do we?! Why can't we all be reasonable, we feel and say: why can't we simply be nice and polite, sit down together and talk through our differences and dreams?

¹ In *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd edition, eds Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore

That is Herod's problem with the Baptist. It is not that he does not recognise that John is rightly raising issues of political and personal ethics, of justice and what we might now call human rights and dignity. It is that John is not doing this quietly or within the restricted guidelines and political limits of the more comfortable and powerful. Putting it simply, and in Australian slang terms, John the Baptist was an absolute ratbag: a holy ratbag perhaps, but a real ratbag no less – very much, but with some significant nuances, like his cousin Jesus. Tension is therefore core to Mark's Gospel. From start to finish, Mark is not only not interested in softening social, political and religious difference but in elevating them.

How do we handle tension? Churches as a whole, and not least those with a consensus style of decision-making, are very uncomfortable with tension. Yet it cannot be wholly avoided if we genuinely seek shalom, the divine realm of love and peace with justice. That, for example, was at the heart of Martin Luther King's witness, including his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*,² excerpts of which we also heard read earlier.

King, as we heard, was most certainly not opposed to negotiation and to consensus decision-making. However King was clear that those who are oppressed have never moved forward unless they have actively spoken up and acted for their own liberation, challenging not only those most opposed to them but also those so-called 'moderates', 'liberals', and supposed 'allies', who continue to ask the oppressed to 'wait', and delay change. As the failure of the Voice proved, and the continuing inequalities of queer people in all 'mainstream' Churches reflects, 'moderate' politics too easily ends up with delay. Tension, as King affirmed, is necessary, lest we continually deny justice. This is part of the witness of Mark and John the Baptist.

Secondly, such divine tension at the heart of the Gospel is expressed in immediacy. Mark's Gospel is replete with this. Jesus is always doing things 'immediately', 'at once' and 'then' something else. Healings, miracles, the restoration of well-being and full human dignity, are not delayed. They happen right here and now, without waiting for permission, and as means and symbols of the coming of shalom, divine flourishing, in its fullness. Soaked as he was in the *kairos*, in Gospel time, no wonder Martin Luther King, spoke out against what he called '*the myth of time*', associated with being told to 'wait', far too long, for justice. As the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* puts it:

We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of people willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.

On this Bastille Day, it is also pertinent to recall Oscar Wilde's observation: that, in many ways:

*the most tragic fact in the whole of the French Revolution is not that Marie Antoinette was killed for being a queen, but that the starved peasant of the Vendee voluntarily went out to die for the hideous cause of feudalism.*³

² [Letter from Birmingham Jail \(csuchico.edu\)](https://www.csuchico.edu/~lking/letter.htm)

³ In *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, 1891

Wilde, like Martin Luther King, was clear about the need for disturbers of the peace, which is what we see represented in John the Baptist, and, among other things, in Jesus. Indeed, note that, just ahead of today's story, Jesus has been rejected by his home community. For 'agitators' said Oscar Wilde: disturbers of the peace:

are a set of interfering, meddling people, who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community, and sow the seeds of discontent amongst them. That is the reason why agitators are so absolutely necessary. Without them, in our incomplete state, there would be no advance towards civilisation.

All of which Gospel tension, immediacy, and disturbing faith in action, brings us back to where hope emerges in today's story. The key is in the last sentence, where, after John's death, we are told this: 'When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.' Mark is encouraging us, not only to share in being disturbers of the peace, like John and Jesus, and to see that their stories are deeply aligned, but also to believe in resurrection, hope beyond hope, love beyond the crushing of love. As Vaclav Havel, the Czech poet, dissident, former prisoner of the State, and first President of a liberated nation, said, in words recorded in his book *Disturbing the Peace*:

The kind of hope that I often think about... I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us, or we don't. It's a dimension of the soul... Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out....

You do not become a 'dissident' just because you decide one day to take up this unusual career. You are thrown into it by your personal sense of responsibility, combined with a complex set of external circumstances...

We must not be afraid of dreaming the seemingly impossible if we want the seemingly impossible to become a reality.

So may we continue to be disturbed by John the Baptist, and by Jesus, and may we not hesitate to be disturbers of the peace, where deep-down love is present.

In the name of the bearer of Love, the prince of Peace,

who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.