

LENT 2 C

Luke 13:(22-30)31-35

The Man Who Killed The Preacher

It makes a good setting for a story of passion, intrigue, and murder –
the castle of Machaerus perched among the rocks
high up above the Dead Sea
looking out over the parched valley of the Jordan.

The owner of the castle was King Herod Antipas,
a puppet of the Romans who ruled Galilee in the time of Jesus.
The Herods were an unsavory family with a reputation for cruelty,
deception, intrigue, and unbridled sensuality.

From the castle of Machaerus and other palaces
Herod exercised his authority and devised the schemes
for self-aggrandizement that earned him from the lips of Jesus
the title of “**that fox.**”

When this story begins the “**fox**” had retreated to his lair
and was spending, no doubt, his days in political maneuvering
and his nights in revelry and dissipation.

We can imagine the company he entertained – his henchmen
from Galilee, Roman officers, visiting officials from Rome,

and all the talent that was needed to amuse them.

What we would not expect was that among them was a preacher.

Down in one of the dungeons

was a rough character in a camel hair coat

who had recently roused the whole country side

by his open-air preaching and who,

because of his habit of dipping those

who responded to his message in the Jordan River,

was known as John the Baptist.

He was the extra guest at some of Herod's parties and eventually,

the ghost that haunted them all.

Herod had had John arrested for at least two reasons.

One was that his movement had gained so much momentum

that the Roman authorities might easily have become suspicious

that some kind of rebellion was afoot.

Another was that John was utterly tactless

in his references to Herod himself.

The king had just taken to himself, one Herodias, his brother's wife –

without waiting for either a death or a divorce.

John denounced this brazen contempt for

accepted morality and the law of God and said bluntly to Herod:

“It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”

Now, that’s the kind of preaching that’s known as ***“meddling,”***

and Herod eventually ordered his arrest.

It’s not surprising to read that Herodias, the lady concerned,
was after John’s blood.

At this point Herod’s behavior becomes a little difficult to explain.

This was a man who could order an execution

as briskly as you or I would order a cup of coffee – but he stalled.

He kept John locked up but refused to have him killed.

Even stranger was the fact, that from time to time,

he would let him out of his cell

for the express purpose of preaching to him,

either alone, or in front of his whole court.

Mark, in his Gospel, gives us a clue to the working of Herod’s mind.

He says, ***“He was afraid of John because he knew***

that John was a good and holy man, so he kept him safe.”

So, until the tragic denouement when Herodias found a way

to silence the prophet, we have his extraordinary situation.

Every now and then, by day or night,

when Herod was either drunk or sober, with company or alone,

the preacher-prisoner would be dragged from the dungeon

to deliver a sermon.

We can see the puzzled countenance of Herod Antipas

as he listened, as if he were asking himself what compelled him

to go through with this agonizing performance.

For John, every time he preached, literally put the fear of God in him.

Yet it seemed that he just had to listen.

As Mark puts it with quiet irony: ***“He liked to listen to him,***

even though he became greatly disturbed

every time he heard him.”

How do you account for this odd behavior?

Herod was not the kind of man

we know today who likes to hear a polished sermon

without caring too much about its content.

In any case, John’s sermons were anything but polished.

He told people frankly and bluntly how to behave.

Samples of his preaching are given us in Luke's Gospel.

To the crowd, he said: ***“Whoever has two shirts
must give one to the man who has none,
and whoever has food must share it.”***

To the tax collectors, he said: ***“Don't collect more than is legal.”***

To the soldiers, he said: ***“Don't take money from anyone
by force or false charges; be content with your pay.”***

That's not what you call popular preaching.

Probably the word went round in church circles

that this rough preacher wasn't really ***“spiritual.”***

But Herod liked it and came back for more. Why?

You can say if you like,

that since he was surrounded by sycophants

he got a kick out of listening to a man who was not afraid

to give him hell, but I think the real answer is,

that here was a man, who deep down in his heart,

recognized the voice of God and could not resist

putting himself within its range.

He was experiencing what you and I know from time to time –

the attraction of a disturbing God!

This reminds me of the words of St. Augustine:

***“Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless
until they find their rest in thee.”***

I believe that this is true for every human being that ever lived.

We are designed by God and for God, and no matter how far
we drift from him we are never altogether out of range
of his disturbing presence.

This is why even the professed atheist

often shows himself vulnerable to the divine appeal –
whether it comes through a book, a conversation,
or the life of a friend.

There are men and women who have detached themselves

completely from religious practices
and yet who are strangely drawn,
from time to time, by some thought of God.

Nearly all of us have known this tug-of-war in our souls.

There is the pull to be free of the moral restraints,
the diving judgment on our lives,

and there is the pull of conscience that keeps convincing us
that our true freedom and peace
will come in submission to God's will.

Thus, we become puzzled people. There would be no puzzle
if only we could be entirely rid of this conscience
that disturbs us with the thought of God.

All kinds of things could be swept under the rug –
these habits we know we should break, the self-indulgence
that can so easily become a way of life,
our timidity in standing up for what we know to be right,
the grip of material things on our lives.

If we get rid of this disturbing God,
we would surely be much more comfortable. (Incidentally,
it's funny that people should accuse Christians of believing in God
simply because we want to believe in him: sometimes we don't.

There is wishful thinking in atheism too!)

Well, Herod in the end, succumbed to the temptation
to rid himself of the voice of God. You remember the story.

One night in the castle the daughter of Herodias,
bewitched the befuddled king, with her dancing,
and in an unguarded moment,
he offered her anything up to half his kingdom.

She consulted her mother who immediately seized her chance
and told the girl to demand the head of John the Baptist.

So the order was given, and the preacher was killed.

And when Herod saw that severed head

delivered up on a dish he must have said to himself:

***“Well, I didn’t plan it – but thank goodness that accusing tongue
will wag no more against me,
and my conscience will have some peace.”***

He had apparently succeeded in silencing the voice of God.

But he was wrong. We read that later, rumors started circulating
that another preacher was operating in his territory,
drawing even bigger crowds than John,
and disturbing the whole countryside.

His informers reported what was going on
and the question was raised:

“Who is this new preacher from Nazareth?”

Various guesses were made when suddenly

the conscience of Herod exploded in superstitious terror:

“It is John whom I beheaded; he is risen form the dead!”

He was learning the hard way that you can cut off a head,

but you cannot murder the **Word** of the living God.

Like Shakespeare’s **Macbeth** he found

that silence is no solution, once man has grown a conscience,

that will not be silenced.

“The times have been that when the brains were out,

the man would die, and there an end; but now they rise again

with twenty mortal murders on their crowns,

and push us from our stools:

this is more strange than such a murder is.”

Macbeth, like Herod, is one of the puzzled people –

a villain who cannot plunge through all his crimes

beyond the range of the voice of God.

Enough of Herod and Macbeth. Their successors are still with us,

but – thank God – such villains are rare.

But there is more to this story than the annals of a distant crime.

I might say that there is more than one way to kill a preacher.

In other words, everyone of us

has our method of smothering the voice of conscience.

We can do it by the company we keep. It doesn't take long for us
to absorb the ethics of those around us.

There are thousands today

who have moved from an environment of home and church

where the conscience was formed,

to some big city where standards and convictions are totally different.

I am not suggesting that what may have been narrow

and restrictive ethics are never to be questioned,

or even that we should always feel guilty

about breaking some taboo of our early training.

But I am saying that a pagan environment can easily begin

to smother some fundamental ideals of honesty, charity,

and chastity that deep in our hearts

we still acknowledge as the voice of God.

And so, from time to time, we hear that voice and are puzzled people.

Then there is the method of slow starvation.

Our conscience needs to be fed.

That means exposing ourselves to the presence of God in prayer,
in reading the Bible, in Eucharistic worship.

It is so easy to begin to starve the conscience

and to slip into a way of life where there is little chance
of being disturbed by the divine.

It can happen so gradually that we don't realize what we are doing.

Then one day, it may be in a time of crisis,

something rises from the dead

and we find that we are not so confident and happy

in our freedom from religious habits as we thought we were.

There are other ways of killing the preacher within us.

We can ridicule him with lethal mockery,

argue him to death with sophisticated talk,

send him to the mortuary of ancient superstitions.

But my point is that, even in this spectacularly secular age,

he will always rise again.

"It is John whom I beheaded; he is risen from the dead."

There are people walking the streets today who are haunted by
the ghost of the preacher within, who refuses to lie down.

Let me return to the words of Augustine.

***“Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless
until they find their rest in thee.”***

Lent is time to be more positive about this encounter
with the voice of God. After all, I am not commissioned
to preach the message of John the Baptist, but of Jesus Christ.

And Christ, although he followed the Baptist
in arousing the conscience and confronting men
with the judgment of God, came to bring Good News.

And this news is, that the God
whose voice we have been trying to silence,
wants to bring us mercy not judgment,
forgiveness not condemnation, liberation and not bondage.

“God sent not his Son into the world,” we read,

“to condemn the world;

but that the world through him might be saved.”

This is the Good News that the Church should be telling
in word and deed.

The Christian preacher is not still around
in order to smite the conscience
and pass judgment on other people,
but to tell of a God who receives us as we are,
who can cleanse the conscience and free us from our fears.

There's a knocking at the door. That's what I am saying.
Since God has made us for himself it will never go away.
Sometimes the noise of the world, like a gigantic cocktail party,
makes it impossible for us to hear.
Sometimes we have tuned it out
just as someone living by a railway track no longer hears the trains.
But every now and then we hear it and are puzzled.
What is it? An echo from a religious past?
A psychological disturbance from the unconscious?
A threat from an unknown accuser?
We shall remain puzzled until we respond to the knocking
and open the door.
Then we shall see the One who had been waiting for us.
On his hands and feet

are the marks of the condemnation we awaited, and he says:

“Come unto me – you puzzled - and I will give you rest.”

For he brings with him, not the judgment

but the welcome of the God who made us.

This is the discovery that Herod himself could have made,
when Jesus stood before him at his trial.

This is the discovery that Pilate could have made,
as he took the easy way out.

This is the discovery that millions have made from that day to this.

The voice that cannot be silenced
is waiting to give the inner rest of his pardon
and the communion of His presence.

***“Behold,” he says, “I stand at the door and knock;
if any man hears my voice and opens the door,
I will come in to him, and eat with him, and he with me.” Amen.***