

Arnhem/Nijmegen, Trinity 7, year B – 14 July 2024 (Revd Dorienke de Vries)

2 Sam 6.1-5,12b-19; Psalm 24; Eph 1.3-14; Mark 6.14-29

We all know people who can be a proper wet blanket at times. Imagine:

everybody is excited about some great plan or vision; all eyes are sparkling and imagination is running wild. But the wet blanket will just sit there, frowning a little, and then speak the infamous words, 'Yes, but...' and then a long list of misgivings will follow.

Yes, but have you considered x? Have you looked at it from angle y? Have you thought about z? And everybody sobers up and is forced to become realistic.

A wet blanket can be very annoying. And it's no fun to be one, believe me. But in church wet blankets are crucial. We cannot do without their voice, because it helps us to remain sober and to face reality.

Now the story of the beheading of John the Baptist is such a wet blanket. A story that helps us to remain sober and to face reality.

To understand this we need to look at the wider context. The story begins with 'King Herod heard of it'. Of what, exactly? Well, in the previous verses Jesus has sent out his disciples to proclaim the kingdom and to call people to repentance. And so, we read, they went out, casting out many demons, anointing with oil many who were sick, and curing them.

Now that's what we like a mission story to sound like! Healing and bold proclamation, power and triumph. The story continues in verse 30, where the apostles gather around Jesus and tell him all that they have done and taught.

From Luke's account we know they were overjoyed, and we can just picture them, eager to share their stories with Jesus, interrupting each other, not knowing where to begin for sheer excitement.

But between these two verses Mark has inserted the sad story about the execution of John the Baptist. He deliberately interrupts a wonderful mission story to give a detailed account of John's horrible execution. He describes all the nasty elements of resentment, hate, anger, jealousy, sexual immorality and abuse of power that have led to the death of this prophet.

Why? The evangelists were skilful writers. So the message they share with us is not only in the words, but also in the order of stories and in the way they have been edited.

Now Mark, of course, wrote his gospel long after the events he describes. And so he was able to see a parallel with another story. Do we not see it ourselves? Do we not hear the echo of Jesus' own fate? Here is king Herod, being manipulated by his wife. He is trapped, and even though he hates to do it, he condemns John to death.

And there, later on, is Pilate, being manipulated by the religious leaders of the people. He is trapped, and even though he hates to do it, he condemns Jesus to death.

John's story ends in verse 29: 'When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.' Do we not hear the echo? How Jesus' body was claimed from the authorities, taken away and laid in a tomb?

The parallel is deliberate. The disciples may be carried away by the success of their mission. But Mark reminds them and us that every mission, every ministry, every calling falls under the shadow of the cross.

So if our ministry is flourishing – if our mission activities are bearing fruit – by all means, let us thank God, and celebrate together, like the disciples did. But let us never forget that being a Christian is not about a succession of spiritual kicks and highs. We follow a crucified Messiah, and a disciple is not above their master.

Therefore John's fate confronts us with uncomfortable questions. He went to prison because he confronted a mighty king with his wicked lifestyle. What about our own calling to confront the powers of our own day and age? What about our own calling to expose all forms of injustice and vice? Are we prepared to speak and live the truth, even when it won't make our lives any easier? A sobering thought, forcing us to face reality.

But that's not all. I can't help feeling for John, all alone in prison. Not exactly the just reward from God, that is promised in Psalm 24 to those who speak the truth. From the other gospels we know that John found it hard to keep the faith. He started to doubt whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah, or whether he, John, had been mistaken after all. Wondering why Jesus was proclaiming release to the captives, while doing nothing for his cousin. How utterly alone and deserted John must have felt, as he did not and could not know whether and how the story would continue and unfold.

In that way John's fate reminds us of all those modern prophets in prisons and concentration camps all over the world. People who are paying a high price, like John, for their faith and for their commitment to justice, peace, equality, or care for creation. Multitudes of them are forgotten by the world. Multitudes of them have died without seeing the fruit of their labours.

Without any sign or indication that their dreams would come true. A sobering thought, again.

I feel like I've been a proper wet blanket until now. I said, at the beginning, that wet blankets are very important in the ministry of the church. And that is true. It is important that we are realistic, that we face reality, that we are sober in our thinking, even when things are going well for us.

But of course that is not the end of the story. Being sober helps us to see the whole picture. It helps us to face the stark aspects of reality, but also to notice the light. And even in this bleak story, there is comfort and good news to be found in the way Mark has crafted his narrative.

John has died, and that is very sad. The clear link between the story of John's death and that of Jesus himself throws the shadow of the cross on his and on any ministry. But that is not the end. It also tells us that Jesus did not desert John in the end. He shared his fate. And this does not just mean that he was executed like John had been executed. It means so much more than that. John may have felt deserted. But he will have found out by now that he was not alone. Jesus would join him in death, and break the chains of Hades also for his cousin. And the mission of the kingdom has continued in a way that John himself could never have imagined.

We who live after the resurrection have more knowledge about these things than John ever had. That doesn't mean that we never despair. But let us take heart, and know: if our ministry is not flourishing – if our mission activities seem fruitless – if we find ourselves in darkness and God seems far away – Jesus is with us there; in the deep and the dark with us. Whenever things look bleak and hopeless, it is the shadow of his cross. A cross that was meant to

end his ministry and his life for ever, but instead became a sign of victory and new life. The powers of death and darkness will never win. The mission of the kingdom will continue. The mission of the kingdom will bear fruit, exceeding our wildest dreams.

Let us remain faithful to that mission. Whatever happens to us – it's worth it.

Amen.