

Mark 6:1-29: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 6 verses 1 to 29. And they took offence at him.

And Jesus said to them, A prophet is not without honour, except in his hometown, and among his relatives, and in his own household. And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.

And he marvelled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villagers teaching. And he called the twelve, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.

He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff, no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there.

And if any place will not receive you, and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them. So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent.

[1 : 25] And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them. King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known.

Some said, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him. But others said, He is Elijah. And others said, He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.

But when Herod heard of it, he said, John, whom I beheaded, has been raised. For it was Herod who had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her.

For John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe.

When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee.

[2 : 32] For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you. And he vowed to her, Whatever you ask me I will give you, up to half of my kingdom.

And she went out and said to her mother, For what should I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in immediately with haste to the king, and asked, saying, I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

And the king was exceedingly sorry. But because of his oaths and his guests, he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head.

He went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl. And the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Mark chapter 6 begins with Jesus teaching in his hometown of Nazareth, with his disciples with him. He teaches in the synagogue, and many see what he is doing, recognize the wisdom he is speaking with, and the power of the works that he is performing.

[3 : 44] However, it seems as if the true recognition that this invites is immediately lost, as their presumed familiarity with his family and his origins prevents them from recognizing him.

Indeed, rather than responding properly, it leads them to take offense at him. The psychological movement here is really remarkable, yet illuminating. Jesus addresses a saying to them about the failure of prophets, hometowns and households to honor them.

The familiarity that people have with a prophet can lead them to domesticate them, and fail to appreciate the power of their message. We can often attempt to do this when we encounter something that challenges or unsettles us.

Like the people of Nineveh, rather than moving from the remarkable character of something to reconsidering ourselves, our behavior and our thinking in light of it, we try to domesticate it, to subdue it to that which is familiar to us, to something that poses neither challenge nor threat to us.

We try to put the new wine into the old wineskins, to squeeze the unsettling idea into categories that will tame it, by naming it. This is always a danger for people who are familiar with the things of God.

[4 : 53] At a certain point, eyes can glaze over, and a word heard enough times can be heard no more. Familiarity breeds both contempt and insensitivity. Jesus couldn't do any mighty work there because of their unbelief.

Not because he was without the power, but because they had no faith to receive it. We should remember that Jesus didn't usually go out of his way to heal people, rather people came to him. And it's quite likely that the problem here is simply that only a very few sick people even bothered to approach him seeking healing.

Everyone else, inoculated by their sense of familiarity, just stayed home. Jesus calls the twelve here and sends them out two by two, giving them authority over the unclean spirits.

The accenting of that authority that they have over the unclean spirits is in keeping with Mark's treatment of Jesus as the anointed champion, doing battle with the forces of evil. They're sent out in twos, like spies preparing for the later conquest in Numbers chapter 13.

They are sent out without provisions, dependent upon the people that they are sent to for their sustenance and their supplies. It's a test of hospitality, as we see in the story of Sodom in Genesis chapter 19, or as in the story of Rahab and Jericho in the book of Joshua.

[6 : 09] If they're not welcomed, they will shake the dust off their feet, marking out the place for judgment in the future. As they go, they extend the message of the kingdom, calling people to repent in preparation for the coming reign of the Lord.

And the message is confirmed with attendant signs. News of this, Jesus' ministry and the ministry of his disciples, comes to King Herod. Herod was largely a puppet ruler, but being called king here may highlight the conflict between two kings, or between two royal figures, like King Saul opposed the anointed David.

Herod believes that Jesus is John the Baptist resurrected. There's clearly a resemblance between the two. As John performed no mighty signs, we must presume that the resemblance was chiefly in the boldness and the content of their teaching.

Herod had a complicated relationship with John, which perhaps reminds us of King Saul's relationship with the prophet Samuel, who anointed David. Herod heard John gladly, even though John rebuked him for his sin in having his brother's wife.

And the fact that John would rebuke Herod to his face is an indication of John's prophetic boldness. The story of John the Baptist plays off the story of Elijah. Herod is like Ahab.

[7 : 25] He's spurred on by his manipulative wife, Herodias, who's similar to the character of Jezebel. John has already been compared to the character of Elijah in the way that he dresses, in his ministry in the wilderness, and in other respects.

So it's not surprising to us that he is presented in a similar sort of relationship with the king and his manipulative wife, in this case, as Elijah had with Ahab and Jezebel.

The description of Herod's birthday feast reminds us of events in the book of Esther. In that story, it begins with a feast, and there are several details within it that are repeated within the story of John the Baptist and Herod.

In Esther chapter 2 verse 9, we are told, Much as the story of Esther begins with a king's feast, and a woman having to present herself before the feast for the pleasure of the guests, so the story of the beheading of John the Baptist contains similar elements.

Furthermore, the declaration of the king that he would give the woman who requests up to half his kingdom is something that we find in the book of Esther again, in chapter 5 verse 3, verse 6, and chapter 7 verse 2.

[8 : 36] Herodias in this story plays a sort of anti-Mordecai to her daughter, just as Mordecai is the guardian of Esther who advises her in how to save her people, so Herodias is the one who advises her daughter in how to take the life of the prophet.

And the daughter is like Esther, but a reversal of Esther, one who uses the favour of the king to destroy rather than to protect life. Herodias is also like Zeresh, the wife of Haman who spurred him on in his attempt to kill Mordecai, the man who wouldn't bow the knee to him.

We see this in Esther chapter 5 verses 9 and following. The whole story makes Herod look very weak too. He's manipulated by the women around him. He's called a king, but he's not really a king, and his behaviour reveals his weakness too.

The head of John the Baptist is presented as if it were a platter at a feast. The flesh of the prophet is food. And this is immediately followed by a contrasting meal as Jesus feeds the 5,000.

While the party of Herod feasts upon the flesh of the saints, Jesus miraculously feeds his followers. One final thing to reflect upon, Herod was wondering whether John had been resurrected.

[9 : 50] The resemblance between Jesus and John the Baptist was quite noticeable. However, Jesus was not John the Baptist raised from the dead. Nevertheless, there is a foreshadowing of Jesus being put to death and of his resurrection here.

A question to consider. The people of Nazareth recognised Jesus as the carpenter, the son of Mary, while King Herod recognises Jesus as John the Baptist, whom he beheaded.

What do these forms of recognition or misrecognition say about the people who make them? How might reflecting upon such bad examples help to instruct us in adopting a more accurate recognition of who Christ is?