

MARK 6:14-29 IT MAKES ME UNCOMFORTABLE

Loving Lord, take our humble thoughts and lead us nearer to your truth we pray, in Jesus name. Amen

We just heard the tale of John the Baptist's execution. What a gruesome story. I remember way back in the parish we were at in Lewisham, the Sunday School kids were invited to make a montage of their favourite Bible story. They chose this one, and made a multi coloured jelly head of John the Baptist; black for the hair, yellow for the face, all set on nice red bed on a paper plate!

King Herod of Galilee had pinched his brother's wife, and committed a grave sin in the eyes of the Jewish Law by marrying Herodias, a living brother's wife. John Bap condemned this action in public. It is always unwise to get on the wrong side of a King. Thomas More once remarked that even though he was Henry the 8th's Chancellor and favourite, should the King gain a single castle in France by his execution, his head would not fail to fall within the day!

Herod banged John up in prison, yet he frequently sent for him, and was fascinated by the Prophet's voice. It was undoubtedly the authentic voice of God.

Herod was simultaneously attracted and repelled.

But Herodias wanted revenge! Her daughter Salome was a stunner, and a bit of a dancer too.

At a court dinner, she strutted her stuff, and the drunken Herod promised her anything as a reward. (A favourite of mine is Richard Strauss' opera "Salome". I recently revisited a recording with Bryn Terfel singing the Baptist! What a voice, burnished bronze, with an unusual weight of tone. You may also know the famous "Dance of the Seven Veils". I don't think I'll give you a rendition right now!)

Salome was somewhat dim. "What shall I ask for mum?" Herodias saw her chance. "Go to the old fool and say 'Give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'" Herod was horrified, but gave the order anyway to save face. The authentic voice of God was silenced, it was too uncomfortable.

Truth is challenging, and very often it can sound like bad news.

Francis of Assisi, often perceived as one of the most Christ-like of Saints is thought of as a sweetie, yet in reality he was a tough cookie. Francis was the son of a wealthy silk merchant, but he chose to challenge the materialism of his day head on by embracing poverty.

Francis challenged futility of war; the Crusades were raging, so Francis took ship and sailed to the Middle East where he spent two years haranguing Saladin. As a holy man he was welcome, but Francis failed to bring peace or convert the Sheikh. But full marks for trying!

Francis challenged the fat laziness of the Church, very often he simply popped in on the Pope who had no choice but to listen the ruthless expose. It was all pretty dodgy; poverty, peace and probity were not popular virtues, and the Franciscan Order only just survived proscription. Yet despite this tough talking the winsomeness of Francis' faith made him loved by all.

As a church we Anglicans have responded to this need to challenge in our own times –and one way we see it is in the fourth of our five marks of mission: 'To seek to transform unjust structures of society.'

There are people of faith doing amazing work in this field -many Christians in Amnesty for example -my own friend Louise who knows that it is her Christian calling to continue to challenge any government which enacts the death penalty.

Outside St Paul's a few months ago there were many Christians amongst the protestors – in what way is the power of the banks a reflection of the love of Christ for all? How can we continue to support an ethic of economics which is relentlessly widening the gap between those who have way beyond their possible needs and those who can't bring up their family with any dignity?

What about internationally? With our Indian guests here this morning - what about the richest in that country buying up land from the poorest and then paying them less than subsistence levels of wages?

The list is scarily long -and you'd have your own passions. Why do we continue to send our young offenders into a system that brutalizes them and sends them out ill equipped to get a job and thrive and very well equipped to continue to live in the criminal twilight zone?

Why, when we mock countries such as Holland and Switzerland for being small and unimportant on the world stage can't we manage to achieve their 99% of adult literacy?

I'd still be at it at lunch time if you let me. And it isn't really a matter of getting on a soap box at all -it's a matter of the daily lives of real people. If you loose your job because of the crass stupidity of certain bankers - you are not collateral damage -you are a precious individual struggling to feed their family -and feeling worthless.

That's why we are called to challenge unjust structures in society - because the gospel -the Good News of Jesus Christ is meant to be just that -good news. Not in a notional way -in an actual, incarnational, real way which enables you to flourish as the person God created you to be.

Now as many of you know this time last week I was at General Synod. Happy to talk about it in detail if you are interested -but I know that the public perception was that we were totally stuck in a quagmire of introspection -and I couldn't agree more. Trouble is this -if we are to respond to good old John the Baptist and be the call of justice in our society then we simply have to get our own house in order.

I know that it seems a good idea to be as generous and open as we can possibly be to those who maintain they can't accept women's ministry for theological reasons -but do you know what those theological reasons actually are?

Reform, one of the main groups campaigning against women's ordination, names the Rev Angus MacLeay as the Chairman of its trustees. He and his curate at St Nicholas, Sevenoaks, hit the national news headlines recently.

To quote the newspaper report:

A vicar has caused outrage among his congregation after urging women to "be silent" and "submit" to their husbands...

He said women should "not speak" if asked a question that could be answered by their husbands and should "submit to their husbands in everything"...

I wouldn't want my daughter,- granddaughter, to go to a church and have that preached at her -and by putting a license to proclaim those sorts of attitudes into the law of the land we undermine our ability to do the real

work -the really important John the Baptist stuff -because we are incapable of being clear or clean about our own ethical standards.

The simple rule that sums this up is probably: those who seek equity must do equity"

Now we will never get it right -the church is imperfect and if it were perfect the likes of you and me would be out on our ear. We can't wait till we have our internal behavior totally aligned before we dare speak. I guess if you'd set the Daily Mail on John the Baptist you've have been able to unearth some dodgy stuff -but he didn't keep his mouth shut.

Sometimes a tough message is strangely attractive. People who have strong opinions and live them out can be respected. Sometimes a tough message, though in the long term it transforms the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable, costs the messenger dear.

Archbishop Oscar Romero was shot as he encouraged his flock, as Christians, to obey God's higher order and to stop carrying out the government's repression and violations of basic human rights. He was shot, as you know, whilst celebrating communion. Here is a very interesting quote -words which challenge the extent to which we dare to live out the gospel:

it is important to note why [the Church] has been persecuted. Not any and every priest has been persecuted, not any and every institution has been attacked. That part of the church has been attacked and persecuted that put itself on the side of the people and went to the people's defense. Here again we find the same key to understanding the persecution of the church: the poor.

God' voice speaking to us through his messengers is uncomfortable. Sometimes we need to hear that message and sometimes we need to be that message.

I would like to think that you will go away from here this morning and think what this means for you. AMEN