



Sunday Reflection

Ordinary Time

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 11 July 2021

Pentecost 7

We worship a merciful Lord, who sent his only son to this earth knowing he would suffer and die, so that we might have forgiveness and life eternal. We are all unworthy sinners, yet God loves us. So let us come together and be thankful for God's grace.

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her."

Mark 6:26

An Illustration to set the scene

Way back in 1963, psychologist Stanley Milgram performed ground-breaking research to see just how far people would go to obey an authority figure.

Would they ignore their consciences and hurt others?

Participants were led to believe they were taking part in an experiment to test the effect of punishment on learning.

An official instructed them to flick a switch on a machine whenever a person in a neighbouring room got a question wrong.

They thought, falsely, that this would give that person an electric shock.

Disturbingly, not only did they all comply when told to press the switch they believed delivered the lowest voltage, but most also obeyed when instructed to press the highest voltage switch, which was supposed to give a severe shock, despite believing that this would cause considerable pain and distress.

These were not callous people, however.

Milgram reports that many looked visibly distressed during the experiment and protested against the instructions.

Yet this makes their actions even more shocking.

Although they knew what they were doing was wrong, they still gave in to pressure to conform.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

As we look at today's reading it touches upon similar territory.

Herod Antipas, too, gives in to pressure and goes against his conscience.

Our Gospel story presents an interesting moral dilemma: who was to blame for the Baptist's death?

Many would say Herodias, the instigator of the crime. She wanted the prophet dead, for she had a grudge against him after he'd publicly condemned her adulterous marriage to Herod Antipas, the brother of her ex-husband. When opportunity arose to strike against John, she seized it.

What about Herod's stepdaughter, though?

If she hadn't obeyed her mother's wicked instructions, John would not have been executed.

She clearly relished her involvement in the scheme, rushing back to Herod to demand John's head "at once" and adding the gruesome request that it be delivered on a platter.

Herod was no blameless victim either.

As ruler of Galilee, he had great power.

Mark even calls him “king”, although he was only entitled to use the lesser title, tetrarch.

By referring to him as king, though, Mark emphasises how ironic it was for such a powerful man to be at the mercy of a young girl.

So carried away was he by her dancing that he made a rash oath, promising her anything she wanted up to half of his kingdom.

Although what she demanded was deeply evil and something he really did not want to do, Herod felt powerless to resist, fearful of losing face in front of his guests.

So, despite knowing John to be **“a righteous and holy man”**, Herod ordered his brutal execution.

No wonder his conscience tormented him with fears that Jesus might be John returned from the dead!

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

And so back to the opening illustration - Milgram was prompted to carry out his research by the trial of SS officer Adolf Eichmann.

Eichmann claimed he'd had no choice about his involvement in crimes against the Jews because he had simply been following orders and that the real guilt lay with more senior figures.

Herod probably justified his actions in a similar way, persuading himself that his wife's manipulation and his oath left him no choice.

However, the reality is that all three protagonists – Herod, Herodias and her daughter – were culpable for John's death.Any one of them could have stopped this tragedy from happening.

Often only overtly evil people are labelled as sinners, those like Herodias who callously plan to hurt others.

Yet much evil in the world happens for far more commonplace reasons, akin to the social pressure Herod came under.

We may join in malicious gossip, for example, simply because we want to fit in with the crowd or fail to speak out about wrongdoing because we are afraid of what others will think.

The apostle Paul was right when he said, ***“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”***.

We all need God’s forgiveness and mercy, but recognising that is liberating, for it encourages us to turn to God for help, so we can be changed from within.

May God enable us to be honest about our failings and confess our sins, so we can daily seek to obey Christ anew.

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Mark 6:26

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God’ spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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