

I remember when I was at school, a friend pointed out an advertisement in the ‘Readers Digest’ for a speed reading course. As with many of these ads there was a testimonial by someone famous, in this case an American comedian (whose name I have forgotten). He testified; “After taking this speed reading course, I read Tolstoy’s ‘War and Peace’ in four hours – its about Russia.” He had if you liked got the big picture, even if the finer details of the story had passed him by.

Each Sunday, we read passages of scripture as part of our worship – I think the ordered reading of the Scriptures is a wonderful part of our tradition. But we sometimes lose sight of the wider context in which the passages we read are set. We get focussed on the finer detail and lose sight of the bigger picture.

Take our Gospel reading for today. At one level it is anything but Good News – it is St Mark’s account of the death of John the Baptist. It is a story of a powerful man trapped by his own vanity and weakness. Rather than lose face in front of his guests, he feels trapped into fulfilling the request made by a pretty young woman to whom he has made a rash promise. In the process, John the Baptist falls victim to human frailty, human sin, manifesting itself in the vanity of Herod. It seems rather incongruous to say at the end – ‘This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.

So, let us just step back and take a look at the bigger picture, the context in which Mark has set this story. It is an example of how the way in which the individual writers select and lay out their material tells its own wider story. In this case St Mark has set his account of the death of John the Baptist between

the account of Jesus sending out the disciples in pairs on their own ministry and that of their return with news of their successes.

This is a reminder that our Christian witness, our Christian service does not happen in isolation; it is offered in the context of our life in the wider world.

John, like the prophets before him, in his own day spoke truth to power and power did not like what it heard. This story is a sombre reminder of the fact that this is a world that operates under very different value systems. It is a reminder that, even in a society that would describe itself as Christian, the values of the Kingdom of God and the values of the Kingdom of this world are not identical; they may at times be at odds with each other. This is why messages of reconciliation in areas of conflict; calls for justice for the poor, relief of debt, establishment of fair trade regimes for producers in the 3rd world, voices raised in solidarity with migrants and those who speak on their behalf, have each in their own time been treated with scorn by those in positions of power. They may not be in a position to lop off heads and serve them up on a platter any more, but they will certainly try to discredit and vilify those who challenge the norms of contemporary society.

Simple visible signs have a part to play in keeping the values of the Kingdom of God in public view. As a very simple example of this, as you enter the grounds of this Cathedral, you will see a statue of a figure huddled under a blanket on a bench. This figure is identified as the figure of Jesus simply by the nail marks on his feet. In the midst of a prosperous and bustling city, it stands as an uncomfortable reminder of the truth that in the midst of our plenty, there are those in desperate need, and Christ is in the midst of them.

But of course it is easy to point the finger at others. The more I think about this story of Herod and John the Baptist and its setting in the wider story told to us by St Mark's Gospel, the more I come to realise that we are ourselves a bundle of ambiguities. In our daily living we find ourselves caught between the demands of the Kingdom of God and the demands of the world; caught between our own aspirations to Christian discipleship, Christian service and our own frailty.

This inner tension, with which we can all identify, is articulated in St Paul's words in his letter to the Church at Rome:

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?
²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (*Rom 7:21-25*)

Like Paul, I must accept the reality of that tension within me; and I bring the whole of my being, the good and the bad, the light and the dark, the strong and the frail, the attractive and the ugly; I bring it all into the presence of God and I offer the whole of my being in the service of God. The whole of my life, my journey with God, my journey into God and back to God is a journey of healing and restoration as we work through these inner conflicts and tensions that are part of our seeking to live our discipleship in this broken and imperfect world

There is a prayer that I would often use around Passiontide and Holy Week:

O Jesus, Master Carpenter of Nazareth, who on the cross through wood and nails didst work man's whole salvation; Wield well thy tools in this thy workshop; that we who come to thee rough hewn may by thy hand be fashioned to a truer beauty and a greater usefulness; for the honour of thy name.'

That in itself is a prayer for Christian healing and restoration.

God is a God who can work in and through our inner tensions and ambiguities. I take encouragement from the way the writer of St Mark's Gospel has set out his material. Either side of the tragic and pointless death of John, something wonderful is happening in the lives of twelve ordinary men as they are sent out in the service of Christ and return with wonderful news of all that has happened on their journey. We are witnessing the beginnings of the Christian Church which has outlasted the Herods, the Neros, the Hitlers and the Stalins of this world.

May God take each one of us in all our weakness and imperfection:

'that we who come to thee rough hewn may by thy hand be fashioned to a truer beauty and a greater usefulness;'

that God's name may be honoured and advanced in our lives.