

Last week in our Gospel reading Mark spoke of the visit of Jesus to the synagogue in his home town, where he got something of a mixed reception. The whole passage was set in the context of a growing hostility to Jesus and his message on the part of the religious authorities of his day. Mark, speaking of the reaction of the people in the synagogue in Nazareth, says ‘And they took offence at him.’

In our reading from Mark today we see offence taken to a new level. On the one hand it is the brutal death of John the Baptist at the whim of a weak and vacillating Herod and on the other a foretaste of what lies in store for Jesus himself as hostility to his message develops. Here Herod submits to the pressure of his wife to dispense with John as later Pilate is to submit to the pressures of a mob to dispose of Jesus,

There is another aspect of this story that I want to reflect on this morning and it is that of speaking truth to power.

I recall at the start of the Northern Ireland Peace process I was Rector of Ahoghill, a village on the outskirts of Ballymena in County Antrim. Our local clergy group held a series of meetings with politicians. This particular morning, we were meeting with David Alderdyce, then leader of the Alliance party. On the previous day he had held his first meeting with Sinn Fein in the wake of the IRA Ceasefire. We asked him what he saw as the role of the Church in the coming months. He himself had grown up as the son of a Presbyterian Minister in Ballymena,

His reply has stayed with me. ‘Too often in the past’, he said, ‘the Churches have acted as chaplains to their particular tribe instead of acting as the prophet, saying the sometimes uncomfortable ‘Thus saith the Lord.’

The prophets of old stood in the courts of kings and in the market place where people gathered and spoke truth, often an unwelcome and unpalatable truth, to power. That is a voice that must be heard in each and every generation. Witness to truth does not come without cost. Dietrich Boenhoffer, Fr Maximillian Kolbe, Martin Luther King, Archbishop Oscar Romero stand alongside countless others who have spoken unwelcome truth, who dared to say, ‘Thus saith the Lord’ and paid the cost.

In an age of information overload, in an age of rapid change in the ways in which we access our news, the increasing role of Facebook and other social media in the dissemination of news, in which opinion and prejudice is often presented as fact, there is an ever-present need for a clear and unambiguous declaration of truth in word and deed.

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.

Luke tells us of Jesus, at the outset of his ministry, being invited to read in the synagogue at Nazareth. He chose to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” *Luke 4:18,19*