

## *Following Jesus: The Powers Display their Wares*

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B—14 July 2024

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*Amos 7.7-14; Psalm 85.8-13; Ephesians 1.1-14; Mark 6.14-29*

### INTRODUCTION

Today I want to talk about dinner parties.

In Kenya “dinner parties” were held in the open air and, in this case, was really a wedding reception. The archdeacon’s daughter was being married. My late wife Joy was heavily pregnant with our third child. The bishop’s wife who was sitting next to her was also in late pregnancy. Michael my son was playing around the tables and chairs with Bishop Gitari’s son.

For a moment the boys both stopped in the middle of the circle of chairs obviously discussing something earnestly. Then, in English and Kikuyu they yelled to their mothers while pointing at the bride, ‘Mum she’s as big as you are.’

I love dinner parties. The unspoken is spoken.

And today we read about a dinner party. It is the first of two. The second that Mark describes is the feeding of the 5000. In Mark’s understanding of the Gospel, they are two repelling forces. They are unable to be held together. One is vile; the other life-giving. Together they define the mission of the church.

Why did Mark put this here? Was it necessary? The mission of the apostles has begun. And after this disconcerting story the apostles return for a debrief with Jesus. Why here?

It is a counterpoint to the gospel Jesus brings. Remember the healing, the forgiveness, the freedom from bondage?

But this is a vile story. There is only one way; let’s explore the vile.

### THE YEAST OF HEROD

What happens here is what Jesus, in another episode (8.15), calls the yeast of Herod. He warns his disciples, “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.” Most people explore the yeast of the Pharisees in great detail but almost no-one explores the yeast of Herod. So, let’s start there.

Distracted by the grisly end of John, we mostly miss the point that the real problem for Herod here is Jesus. Jesus terrifies him and he finally believes the social media conspiracy circulating among the people that John has been raised from the dead. But John had never healed people or set people free or forgiven their sins directly.

Of course, the obvious vileness is the gratuitous beheading of John whose head is brought on a serving platter to the daughter of Herodias and delivered to Herodias.

The prophet is dead. Long live the puppet King (Tetrarch).

The Word is silenced. Long live the queen consort.

The marriage arrangements of Herod Antipas were all political, including this one. Herod, Herodias and her daughter are playing out sexual political theatre to gain their goals of status, security, wealth and power. Men and women belong to the powerful and will exercise violence.

The charge that John brought against Herod appears to us to be religious. But only moderns would make such a distinction. To proclaim that the tetrarch ruling over the Jews was doing so in violation of Jewish law was a loaded political charge. You have broken the law of the ruler of the universe. Therefore, you cannot rule us. Herod may vacillate but Herodias does not. There is too much at stake and they have a common intention. To rule without opposition.

And Mark wants us to see how the yeast of Herod works even among disciples. He will scathingly return to that in Chapters 10 and 12.

So, let's explore in just a little detail.

Few explore the nature of the people invited to this dinner party and compare it to the feeding of the 5,000. The 5,000 are people without names.

In contrast here are court nobles or government ministers who govern at the behest of Herod. Then there are army officers or the arm of violence against the people. Finally, but not least, commercial interests (leading Galileans). The inner circle of power is an incestuous relationship of governmental, military and commercial interests. These are the cabal that trade in death, violence, terror, spies and coercion.

That coalition watches on as the comic oath is made and played out. The comic dilemma of the oath is a parody on the shameless methods of decision making among the elite, a world in which human life is bartered to save their hides.

This paves a pathway to the cross, the trial and execution of Jesus by the collaborative political powers of the day.

Herod is what history is about.

The truth is dead; long live the lie.

Every victim of violence in this land experiences this power in the streets, the home, to the very top of government structures.

What to do?

#### THE VICTORY OF THE VICTIM OVER THE POWERFUL

We can of course throw our hands in the air in despair. We can shout and scream in the streets, to no great avail.

Or we can change the story so it does not revolve around Herod Antipas or Pilate but around a very unimportant figure.

Told aright, the true story is first and foremost the story of those that human memory has accorded no names: the poor, the rejected, the despised, the enslaved. These abandoned persons, more or less exclusively, are the whole centre of a proper Christian understanding of the past, and so of a proper Christian desire for the future. Though they have been deprived of their names, God has given them the name of Christ; though they have been forgotten, he has given them Christ's story as their own.—David Bentley Hart<sup>1</sup>

And that is the narrative the Psalm and Ephesians points us to.

As you read the psalm did you read with praise and thanksgiving;

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1. David Bentley Hart. "The Story of the Nameless," p. 244. In *Theological Territories*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2020.

He will speak peace to his people,

His salvation is at hand,

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other  
(Ps. 85.10).

None of that will ever be found in Herod or Pilate or their successors, even in democratic societies. The power of the deceiving lobby is too great to resist.

But did your heart sing with joy when Ephesians was read?

Adoption as his children through Jesus Christ. The new name of the violated forgotten.

Freely bestowed. Herod is always transactional. God never.

Redemption through the price of violence and death, forgiveness freely given beyond measure. Not in Herod.

Wisdom and insight into the true story. Not in Herod.

Caught up into the future, a gathering of all things, an inheritance we barely imagine. Not in Herod.

Therein is our hope. Therein is our life. Therein is our praise. Therein is our story. Not in Herod.

This is the story of the victim over the victor; the story God told the world in Christ.

I love the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. He is viciously atheistic, but he understands Christianity better than many Christians. He also is logical about where his atheism leads. He discerned that Christianity ruins history by banishing heroes and celebrating the slave: get rid of that dreadful story that celebrates meekness, humility and empathy. Then we can restore the history of Herod and Pilate; power and the superhuman.

## CONCLUSION

First a question; which narrative will you buy into? That is the crucial choice.

If we choose the Jesus narrative one thing is essential. We must tell and live the Christian narrative as a constant and subversive counternarrative. It must become a ceaseless interruption and riposte to every other story.

Amen.