

MARK 6:14-29
ST JAMES', 15.7.18, 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

Only three weeks' ago, we were thinking about and celebrating the birth of John the Baptist. Today, we're thinking about him again, but this time, we're thinking about the price he paid for being faithful to his Lord.

There's an opinion amongst some groups of non-believers that having faith in God is an emotional or psychological crutch for people who are weak, scared or stupid; a comfortable option for wimps. Following Jesus, a comfortable option?! I don't think John the Baptist would agree! I read somewhere a suggestion that Bibles should carry a safety warning like this: '*Following the God you meet through these pages is usually dangerous*'. That would certainly be closer to John the Baptist's experience!

DISCIPLESHIP

John the Baptist was called to speak out the truth. He was *a voice of one calling in the desert: Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him* (Mark 1:3). John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and talked about the one who was to come after him, more powerful, who would baptise with the Holy Spirit. Mark tells us in chapter 1 that John was put in prison. The next time Mark mentions John the Baptist is here in chapter 6, where he tells us why John was put in prison.

John didn't just speak the truth and preach repentance in general terms. He spoke to specific people about their personal sins. And he didn't modify his message for the rich or the powerful! Herod had

divorced his wife and married his brother's wife. This was a flagrant act of disobedience to the OT law. In Leviticus 20:21, we read this: *If a man marries his brother's wife, it is an act of impurity; he has dishonoured his brother. They will be childless.* Herodias had also divorced or abandoned her husband, in order to marry Herod. John had consistently told Herod, *It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife* (v 18). John wasn't afraid to speak up and tell people the truth, even if they didn't want to hear it. John wasn't afraid to speak up and tell people the truth, even if they had the power to throw him into prison.

We need to ask ourselves whether we're prepared to follow Jesus at all costs. Are we bold enough to speak the truth, even when we know it won't be welcome? Are we bold enough to speak the truth, even when we know that the consequences may not be at all comfortable for us? For example, if your opinion about the rights or wrongs of blessing or marrying same-sex couples goes against the opinion of the majority of people around you, do you speak out or keep quiet?

The message we're called to speak is Good News. But not everyone will want to hear it! The gospel makes no sense in the world's terms, and lots of people find it offensive. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians, *we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles* (1 Corinthians 1:23). Like John, we're called to speak the truth in love. Like John, we'll find we get a mixed response. A couple of chapters earlier in Mark's gospel, we read the parable of the sower, where Jesus spelled out the different responses to the gospel: as soon as some people hear the word, Satan comes and takes away the word

that was sown in them; some hear the word and receive it with joy, but fall away as soon as trouble or persecution comes because of the word; some hear the word, but allow the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things to come in and choke the word. But there will always be those who hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop -- thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown (Mark 4:15-20). Like John the Baptist, we have to be prepared for all these different responses. Like John the Baptist, we have to remember not to be discouraged when the Good News is not well received. And like John the Baptist, we have to be prepared to take the consequences of being faithful to our Lord.

John the Baptist shows us that following Jesus isn't all about miracles, excitement, and victorious battles, as some Christians would have you believe. No, following Jesus is about obedience, even when the result is that in human terms, we lose everything, even life itself. Jesus could have come and set John free. Instead, he allowed Herod to kill him. The Lord doesn't promise us that he'll make everything come right for us; he doesn't promise us a life free from suffering; he doesn't promise us that if we follow him he'll give us health, wealth and happiness. That's what some people expect. But Jesus tells us to count the cost of following him: *anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see if he has enough money to complete it? . . . Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? . . . In the same way, any of you who does not*

give up everything he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:27,28,31, 33).

Jesus was obedient to death - even death on a cross. When we find that our obedience to the Lord causes us to suffer, he's asking no more of us than he himself had to bear. As those verses from Luke's gospel, which I've just quoted, teach us, we all pay a price when we choose to follow Jesus. Any one of us here this morning may find one day that we too are called to be obedient to death. Are we prepared to pay the price?

Of course, there are rewards to following Jesus too. When the disciples point out that they've left everything to follow him, Jesus says: *"I tell you the truth, no-one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life* (Luke 18:29-30). But in the end, the greatest reward is that our closest friend is the creator of the universe! It's wonderful to know that as we obey him faithfully, the Lord's able to work out his purposes through us, to show his love for this broken world through you and me. And we have the joy of knowing that one day, we will see his face, and reign with him for ever and ever in the new Jerusalem (Rev 22:4-5). The cost of following Jesus is far outweighed by the rewards it brings; so let's remember that when times are hard, and the Lord demands so much from us. 'Following the God you meet through these pages is usually dangerous' - but it's the only way to receive eternal life!



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