

Meet Jesus: Before it's too late

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Preacher: Dick Lucas

[0 : 00] ...open, if you will, because that will check up on me this morning. Now, I've got a special message for perhaps just one person in the church this lunch hour today.

It may be two or three people, it might be several people, but certainly I have a message today for one person or two people who are here today. That may be more accurate. It's not me that's got a special message.

It's this story we've just read, that Willie has just read, that has a message for someone here today. And let me be even more accurate. Since this story we've read is part of the Word of God, then it is more true to say, not that I have a message, or that the story has a message, but that God has a message for someone here today. Almighty God has a message.

So this may not be just an ordinary lunch hour for you. This may be something you need to hear from God. Now, the message of this story is about taking and not losing the opportunities that God gives us to repent and believe.

Sometimes, in my experience from what I've known, those opportunities can be very short, very fleeting. But then when God speaks to us, to any of us, well, naturally he expects an answer now, today, not tomorrow.

[1 : 21] So this story is about taking an opportunity and not losing it. It may be you've been coming to these lunch hours for some time. What you've heard has attracted you because the message of the Lord Jesus is attractive to all sorts and conditions of people.

You've wanted to respond, but something, I don't know what, has stood in the way of your doing it. Something you know that you've got to put right. You're perplexed as to how to do it.

You know that God, when he calls you to have faith, also calls you to repent. There's no such thing, by the way, as just believing in Jesus without repenting.

The two go together, they're married. And you've been perplexed. You don't know quite what to do, but you know you're attractive, and at the same time you know that you're slightly repelled because this message calls upon you to act, and act in a way that may be difficult.

So let's look at our story together. Do have your Bible open. It's a story which is very famous with great artists. I was in a holiday party with Rome last week, and we were trundled around one or two of the galleries, as you can imagine.

[2 : 30] And needless to say, in one of these galleries, which frankly I found most of the paintings rather boring and dark, there was one, as you might expect, of this gory head on a platter, the story of John the Baptist's execution.

It seems to have attracted artists over many centuries. As I looked at it in its frame, I thought to myself, I wonder if the artist had any idea what the meaning of the story was.

Probably not. Artists tend not to be very godly. If you're an artist, you'll forgive me when you were saying that. I'm glad you're an exception. Well, let's look at the story. It was Herod.

There are so many stories of Herod in the Bible. You get muddled up. This is Herod Antipas. He's the ruler of Galilee. He can do exactly what he wants. And he sees that his brother's wife is very attractive, so he simply takes her, steals her.

I can't think why. I don't know how counting the tastes, is there? She seems to have been a very nasty bit of work. But obviously Herod thought she was good and took her. And then along came a rarity.

[3 : 33] A rarity then and a rarity now. Along came a fearless preacher. There aren't many of them around in our country today. Most preachers tell people the nice things, what they want to hear.

But not John. And you'll see what he said in verse 8. I've lost the place. Verse 18, isn't it? You'll see it in verse 18.

And it's just one sentence, very blunt. For John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. I gather that fearless preachers have been appointed to the throne.

I'm very glad because they are a rarity. They are a rarity then too. It's as though somebody went up to Prince Charles some years ago and said it's not lawful for you to have Camilla as your wife, which it wasn't of course.

So you have to be a bold man to speak like that. And what happened? Well, I don't suppose you'd be clapped in prison for saying a thing like that. You'd be much disapproved of. But he was clapped in prison.

[4 : 41] Again, I don't want to bore you with what happened to me in Rome, but we were taken to the prison where Paul is said to have endured imprisonment. And I can tell you it's always a horrible dungeon. And I can't imagine that Herod's prison was much nicer.

So down went the preacher into the prison. And not only was he in prison, but we read that Herodias was after his blood and putting pressure on her husband.

And reading the story, you get the impression that Herodias wore the trousers in that marriage. She probably was the stronger character. So I'll read verses 19 and 20 again.

Herodias had a grudge against John and wanted to put him to death, but she could not. For Herod feared John, knowing he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe.

When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. Now, I don't think, you must tell me afterwards, I don't think that any fiction writer would have imagined such a situation and dared to put it down in print.

[5 : 49] Here is the preacher in prison. He comes up into the state rooms and preaches a sermon to the king, and the king is compelled to listen. He even likes listening to this man who is calling upon him to repent.

Isn't it extraordinary? Down he goes into the prison again for a couple of days. Up he comes and preaches another sermon. And the king is fascinated by what he has to say.

After that, he goes down into the prison again, and up again. It is an extraordinary situation. No one could have imagined that, could they? The king is repelled by being told to repent, but attracted by the amazing news of this Messiah who has come, Jesus the Lord.

And he doesn't know what to do. He is caught. Shall he listen to the preacher? And his conscience tells him to do so. That means putting away Herodias, and he can't do that.

And so he's puzzled. What does the language say here in verse 20? He's greatly perplexed, and yet he hurt him gladly. He's caught. He doesn't know what to do. He's perplexed.

- [6 : 57] Now, I don't know, but I think I may be speaking to somebody who's rather in that situation. You're perplexed. You've been attracted by the call to follow Jesus. But you know that that means you'll have to say no to certain things in your life.
- And you don't know which way to turn. You're caught. You don't want to decide that way because it will mean this. You don't want to decide that way because it will mean that. I want to tell you, if that is your situation, today is the day of decision.
- But Herod wouldn't make a decision. He dithered and hesitated. And what often happens in life, if you're like that, is the decision is made for you. And John, in the end, decided against John the Baptist, but he never wanted to do so.
- And we're told in verse 26 that when he did so, he was deeply distressed by what he'd done. Well, what had happened? They had a men's dinner.
- All the generals were there and the men of importance. And if you know what happens at men's dinner when the Aunt Lady is present, you get exactly what is said here.
- [8 : 02] A girl is called in to dance in front of them and you can be quite sure that it was lewd dancing. They're half drunk, of course. And in the middle of it, the king, half drunk, fascinated by this dancing, provoked by it, makes a very stupid promise.
- Can you imagine it? He says to this girl, you can have half my kingdom. We can't have known what he was saying. She slips out and talks to her mother. She says, what shall I ask?
- She has an opportunity to get wealth. Shall I ask him for money or land or what? And Herodias, this wicked woman, is someone who, given an opportunity, does not dither and does not hesitate.
- And she answers immediately, asking for the head of John the Baptist. What an extraordinary situation. Just look at verse 25. Here's a woman who, when she makes up her mind, makes it up fast.
- Verse 25, she came in immediately with haste, said, I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist. So, mother has said, do it now, take the opportunity, let's get rid of this wretched preacher.
- [9 : 19] Why did the king, even if he was half sozzled, not refuse to be parted to such a ridiculous idea and such wickedness? And the answer's a very sad one, but it's a very up-to-date one in verse 26.
- Verse 26, the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his promise and his guess, he didn't want to break his word. In other words, he didn't want to lose face.
- Well, that's an age-old problem. I, thankfully, heard the gospel in my teens. And I went back to school determined to be a Christian. And I didn't want to lose face, so I didn't tell anybody what had happened to me.
- And so my Christian life was a miserable life. It made no impact on anybody until I went into the Navy where you had to make it plain where you stood. We all fear peer pressure. We fear someone else in the family. We fear a friend. We fear someone with whom we'll have to break a relationship. And so we don't act as we ought. It's really pathetic to see a powerful king doing this because he was frightened what the generals and the colonels would think.
- [10 : 29] How many are in hell today because taking Christ's side would have meant a loss of face amongst a lot of people of no importance at all.
- So we can sum up the lesson of this story like this. To do evil as Herodias wanted, she took her opportunity, she had a split second, and she acted.

And men and women in the world do that. I've noticed I was in the business quarter in the city for 38 years, and I noticed that many of the successful businessmen were people who took their opportunity when it came and acted.

They didn't dither. They didn't hesitate. Here is a wicked woman who seized her opportunity, and I can't imagine how she thought it would work, but she pressed this girl to ask for this impossible thing and got it.

She must have been a very tough customer, mustn't she? Because the story says that when the head came back, when the execution took place, I suppose it took about 20 minutes, half an hour, they didn't give the head to the king.

[11 : 40] They didn't bring it into the dining room, notice. They gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. A tough cookie, I think, don't you? Most unpleasant woman.

The opportunity to do good came to Herod the king. The opportunity to respond to the preacher and repent. It wasn't a split second opportunity. It wasn't just one day.

It was day after day after day. Day after day, he had the preacher up from the dungeon. Day after day, he heard the preacher. Day after day, he was attracted. Day after day, he was compelled to listen to this marvelous message and nearly made a decision, but didn't.

And so it was taken out of his hands, and I suppose, and must suppose, he's in hell today. Let me tell you about John.

John was a young executive in the Bank of England. and this is in the 60s when I first went to the city. He heard a preacher preaching the good news of Christ. To John, who was doing exceptionally well, getting double promotion every year, this was something he'd never heard, and it was good news.

[12 : 53] Afterwards, he went and told the preacher that he wanted to believe this good news and commit his life to Christ. And the preacher was delighted and said, why don't you do it today? And the preacher was rather taken aback when John said, no, I'm not going to do it today.

And the preacher went home crestfallen, thinking here's another man who won't take his opportunity. But I was wrong. John knew there was something to put right.

He knew he couldn't believe unless he repented. I don't know what it was, and I've never asked him. But he went back that day and put it right at some cost. I think I can say soberly to you that I have never seen a young Christian grow so fast.

His Christian life simply took off from that week. He went into Christian ministry in which he's been now for some 30 years. He's just actually retired. He's had a lifetime of fruitful ministry for the Lord.

Just because when the opportunity came, he repented and believed. But he did what the preacher wasn't expecting. He put off the believing until he put that thing right.

[14 : 01] It was repentance and faith. So let me tell you as I close what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches three things. The Bible teaches that we can only take action in repentance and faith today.

The Bible teaches page after page that today is the day of salvation. That we can't decide tomorrow. There are many young people, for example, who say, I've got a whole lifetime in front of me.

There will be plenty of time to decide, but there won't. Because it's always today that I have to make the decision. And it's always hard to repent today. Maybe you wandered into the service today and know that today is the day of salvation for you.

And if you don't take this decision now, it will be too late. God's faith in God's faith in God's faith in God's faith in Jesus is always marked by repentance.

It's always marked by turning away from evil. Now that's an easy phrase for preachers to say in a church like me saying it this morning, turning away from evil. But usually, God, by his spirit, puts his finger on one or two things which have got to be dealt with.

[15 : 14] It may be something very simple. For me at school, it was being willing to confess Christ openly and I wasn't. I thank God for the day in the Navy when I actually confessed Christ openly.

And I remember walking back to our ship that was in dry dock in Malta and it was as I was walking on air. Because for me to come out into the open was repentance. And then faith became real.

The Bible teaches that today is the only day that you can act. The Bible teaches that true faith always has with it a measure of true repentance. Saying no to things that are wrong.

And the Bible teaches that thousands of people lose their souls because they fear what other people would say. They love the praise of men rather than the praise of God. They can't bear to lose face.

And so they do what King Herod did. And let's call it what it was. He made a fool of himself. God has a special message for someone today.

[16 : 22] I don't know who it is and I don't need to know. But in God's name and for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ I do call on you to submit today. To go out maybe and put it right.

Submit to Christ. Come out into the open. And don't listen to people like Herodias. They're not worth listening to. Let's pray together.

Our title today, Before It's Too Late, I tremble for friends of mine who never made that decision and now it's too late. Heavenly Father, how hard it is to face the criticism of friends, relatives, how hard it is to put away the Herodias' of life, how hard it is to listen and then to act.

Thank you for showing us the story of this King so powerful and yet so weak. Give us the strength to do what you call us to do this very day and we ask it through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.