

The Troubled Realities of Ministry

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our reading this morning, and perhaps you turn with me in the Bibles to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 6. If you have one of our church visitors' Bibles, that's page 841.

And we're going to read from Mark, chapter 6, at verse 7. And shortly, Andy Gemmill will be preaching this word to us.

Mark, chapter 6, then, at verse 7. And Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.

He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff, no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.

And he said to them, whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.

[1 : 09] So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed many with oil who were sick and healed them. King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known.

Some said John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That's why these miraculous powers are at work in him. But others said he's Elijah. And others said he's a prophet like one of the prophets of old.

But when Herod heard of it, he said, John, whom I'm beheaded, has been raised. For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her.

For John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that 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. But an opportunity came when Herod, on his birthday, gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.

[2 : 23] For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased King Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you. And if I had to her, whatever you ask me, I will give you up to half of my kingdom.

She went out and said to her mother, for what should I ask? And she said, the head of John the Baptist. And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

And the king was exceedingly sorry. But, because of his oaths and his guests, he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head.

He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl. And the girl gave it to her mother. When the disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Amen. Amen. May God bless to us this solemn word. Well, as we come to God's word, let's just have a moment of prayer together.

[3 : 40] Let's pray for his help. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you're a gracious and loving father, that you know the needs of your children. Amen. The sovereign Lord who controls everything all the time.

And so we pray that you please would speak to us. Teach us what we need to know. Reassure us of what we faint to believe.

Help us, we pray in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. There is something lovely about a new beginning. The start of things when something is brand new, exciting, full of promise, unspoiled, freshly fallen snow. The first day that feels like spring, a birth, a wedding.

The first day at school, a new job, a new year. When things start well, it's often difficult to remember that they're likely to encounter problems ahead, to be spoiled in one way or another.

[4 : 50] But the truth is that a new year brings new problems. And a new job can be much like the old one. And the first day at school can be a bad day and the first of many. Births lead to difficult lives.

A marriage is never quite what a wedding promises. Fresh spring turns to sultry summer. And new fallen snow goes grey in no time at all. Beginnings are great and full of promise.

But continuings in a fallen and sinful world are not nearly so straightforward. And so often when reality dawns, when we wake up the day after tomorrow and things are not quite the way we expected them to be, that can be a difficult thing indeed.

And not least for the Christian. For the Christian who knows that there is a loving God at the heart of the universe, who knows himself or herself to be the child of a loving father.

So often when things are not as expected, the experience can be bitter indeed, provoking at one extreme either cynicism and despair, or at the other, a fake life, where a person pretends that all is well even when manifestly it's not.

[6 : 10] Well, if you're a person who's begun to take seriously the fact that there's a good deal more to reality and indeed to Christian living than hopeful beginnings, and on a morning like this who can fail to be in that position, today's passage is a wonderfully reassuring dose of reality for an ordinary person.

This is an episode marked by a very exciting new beginning. Turn to John at Mark chapter 6 if you're not there already. A new beginning because it's here that the twelve, Jesus' chosen closest companions, embark on a new venture.

They've been part of this story since chapter 3. Just flip back to chapter 3 verse 13, would you? Jesus went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him, and he appointed twelve, who he named apostles, that they might be with him, and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.

They've been with him a couple of chapters worth now of gospel experience. And now they are sent out for the first time, as he said they would be.

Verse 7, he called the twelve and began to send them out. Verse 12, so they went out and proclaimed that people should repent, and they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

[7 : 43] And if you go on to verse 30, it's quite clear that this first sortie has gone tremendously well. Well, the apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they'd done and taught.

It's immensely positive. I imagine it was pretty scary being sent out to preach and have authority over demons. Don't you? But evidently, it's been terrific. A great success.

They come back excited with much to report. And you'll notice how the whole story could move without break straight from verse 13 to verse 30.

However, that's not what happens. In between these very positive bookends, the story is filled up with a really gruesome account, which is just jarringly different from the material that surrounds it. Different in so many ways. It's different in time. The events recorded in the middle of this chapter don't happen at this point in the story chronologically. It's a flashback.

[8 : 59] It's the only flashback in this gospel. The characters are different. The people in the flashback are entirely different from the people in the main storyline at the moment.

The flashback is not necessary for the story to flow from verse 13 to verse 30. Also, the tone is different.

Did you notice that? Instead of preaching leading to progress and the conquest of evil, here preaching produces nothing more than procrastination and the triumph of evil.

Different time, different characters, different tone altogether. And all of those cry out for explanation. Why on earth has Mark included this episode here?

It didn't happen here in time. It's not to do with the same people. And it's so different in tone. And such a lengthy and detailed and different episode.

[9 : 57] It has a very deliberate feel about it, does it not? Why is this episode included in this story at this point? Well, with that question firmly in mind, let's begin by looking at the story itself.

The story of Herod and his wife and John the Baptist. This is a drama in two parts. Let me introduce you first to the characters in the drama.

First, King Herod, Herod Antipas. The youngest of the sons of Herod the Great, who's mentioned in the Gospels in connection with the birth of Jesus.

Herod Antipas was governor for a time under the Romans of Galilee and Perea. And Galilee is the place where this part of the Gospel is happening. He's the king of the territory.

Next, Herodias. Herodias was granddaughter of Herod the Great, the daughter of one of Herod's half-brothers.

[10 : 57] So technically, she's his niece. She is also former wife of another of Herod's half-brothers, Philip. The Herods had a complicated family life.

Herod had divorced his first wife and taken up with his brothers. Third character, John the Baptist. He is the forerunner, the announcer of Jesus.

He's mentioned back in chapter 1. In chapter 1, we get the mention that John is put in prison. It is not explained at that point. In chapter 6, we're told precisely why he was put in prison and what happened to him.

But the link between this flashback and the story in which it sits is the preaching ministry of the twelve. Did you notice that?

Verse 13. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them. And, verse 14, Herod heard of it.

[12 : 00] But the work of the twelve is causing quite a stir, just as the work of Jesus has already caused quite a stir. And people are beginning to speculate. Who is this guy?

John the Baptist, raised from the dead? Elijah or one of the other prophets from the Old Testament returned with spectacular miracles? People do say funny things like that. Sometimes at times of strange events, something unusual happens.

People are reminded of unusual events in the past and unusual people of the past. No one takes that kind of speculation very seriously. It's a bit like Elvis being the guy down the chip shop.

Nobody really believes it. But Herod is not speculating. Look at verse 16. John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.

He hears about the activity and he's in no doubt at all. Herod is a man with past events still very much on his mind.

[13 : 01] And in this flashback, we're introduced to the past events and why they might be on his mind. Let's just turn back for a moment to John the Baptist in chapter 1.

Would you please? Mark's Gospel starts off with God's ancient promise that one day a messenger will come announcing the imminent arrival of God's rescuing king.

Like one of those people who used to walk in front of cars ringing a bell to say that the car was coming. Like one of those people who used to come to town to say that the circus is coming.

The nearest we get these days is the trailer on TV. John announces the coming of Jesus. Look at 1.7. John preached, saying, After me comes he who's mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie.

I've baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. We're told also, verse 4, that John preached about repentance and forgiveness.

[14 : 09] If you turn away from a life of rejecting God, says John, you can be forgiven and treated as though you'd never rejected God. Well, it seems that Herod had a personalized version of that repentance message.

Turn back to chapter 6 and verse 18. John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.

Well, there's the background to the flashback. Now, the flashback comes in two movements.

Movement 1 is a story of wavering indecision. Verse 17.

Herod had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he'd married her. For John had been saying to Herod, it's not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.

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

[15:17] When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. Herod has... John has been brave enough to tell even the king that he will need to change if he's to receive God's forgiveness.

Now, it might not be a big deal to call the king an adulterer these days. Times have changed. Kings are not quite what they used to be. But in those days, that kind of freedom of expression could get a man in deep trouble, and it does.

And Herod's response is entirely predictable, is it not? Verse 17, the secret party arrive in the middle of the night, and the man is never seen again. And verse 27 is precisely what you expect to happen next.

Off with his head. But, in between verse 17 and verse 27, all is not what you'd expect. Because it seems that it wasn't at all Herod's intention to do away with this upstart critical preacher.

John is locked up for his protection. Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death, but she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing he was a righteous and only man, and he kept him safe.

[16:38] The only way to keep him out of the clutches of his dangerous wife is to lock him in prison. She is a dangerous woman, and he knows it. John is locked up for his protection.

Now, that is unusual. The king hears this brave messenger, is greatly perplexed, yet hears him gladly. Herod is a man convinced of the truthfulness of what he has heard.

He knows that John is a man of integrity. He knows that there is truth in what he says. Even though it's painful for him to hear it, we're told, he heard him gladly.

Just imagine the picture in the palace. The royal breakfast is over. Off goes the queen to her daily duties. Immediately, the prisoner is summoned up from the dungeon.

Up from the cells, he comes like the king's personal chaplain, looking a little disheveled. He works the king over for a couple of hours about repentance and forgiveness. Then he's sent back down to the dungeon so that when her majesty comes back for lunch, he's not around.

[17:44] Imagine what the members of the king's court thought about that kind of behavior. Herod is a man convinced by the truthfulness of what he's heard.

He knows it's true. And though there is something good about that, it really is the most dangerous position to be in. to know what's right to do and yet not yet have done it.

And in the end, he's driven by something much more powerful than his conviction about the truth, namely, his wife, who is a formidable woman.

Now, before we get into what actually happens, it's important not to resort to caricatures here.

There is a danger when we read a story like this, we read it as though Herod is an utterly pathetic wimp of a person.

If we do that, we make him seem the kind of idiot king who wouldn't even make it as king in a fairy tale. So let me observe that there is considerable strength in what Herod does.

[18:51] Imagine keeping John out of the reach of a dangerous woman like this. From what we know about her, I imagine that must have made life very difficult at home.

Imagine the atmosphere at the breakfast table might have been a bit frosty, things in the bedroom less than cordial, don't you think? This man is not a complete pushover.

But it's fair to say that at the point when turning towards God meant real change, in his adulterous relationship, he was not prepared to act.

She's probably a good deal younger than him. No doubt that was flattering for him, an older man with a younger woman. May indeed be that she cared for him. Herod was exiled in AD 39 by the emperor Caligula and she accompanied him rather than receiving the favor of the new regime. sometimes nothing makes doing the right thing harder than your family and your closest relationships.

[20:00] When it gets to the point where it would mean a change at that level, then often change becomes very hard and doing the thing you know to be right becomes very hard indeed.

What do you think Herod was saying to himself all those days when he listened to John gladly? I ought to do what he says. Could I do it?

Could I really send her back to her husband? Perhaps I could. I know it would be the right thing to do. It's going to be difficult and messy. It would not make things complicated. And what would

everybody else think?

My advisors, my opponents. Perhaps I'll do it tomorrow or next week. Friends, let's be clear, sometimes being in the right with God demands real and costly change at the most difficult level, the level of personal relationships.

And often that makes people put change off till tomorrow or the next day. You think it'll be easier tomorrow when you've had a bit more time to think about it.

[21 : 11] But it won't. And in the end, for Herod, the opportunities ran out. And his previous indecision, when he could have decided to do the right thing, made it impossible for him to do the right thing when the pressure was really on.

The first half of this story is stretched out over a period of time and is full of wavering indecision. But the second half of this story happens all in a day and is marked by ruthless decisiveness.

Verse 21, an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.

For when Herodias, his daughter, came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, ask me for whatever you wish and I'll give it to you. And he vowed to her, whatever you ask me, I'll give you, up to half the kingdom.

And she went out and said to her mother, for what should I ask? And she said, the head of John the Baptist. And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, I want you to give me the head at once, the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

[22 : 25] And the king was exceedingly sorry. But because of his oaths and his guests, he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately, the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head.

He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl and the girl gave it to her mother. It happens so very quickly, doesn't it?

Scene two of this drama. And this time, it's not his domestic situation which keeps Herod from acting, but his social calendar. It's his birthday. It's a big do.

And I guess it gets slightly sleazy in the end, doesn't it? A dinner for all the bigwigs, his military top brass, the government officials, and in comes the dancing girl.

He just happens to be his stepdaughter, probably in their teens. Everybody's had a bit too much to drink, no doubt she's extremely attractive. And he makes a rash promise and seals it with a royal oath.

[23 : 23] And having done that, he finds it impossible to undo it. Oh, not impossible, of course, in any absolute sense. He could have undone it.

Just way beyond him. And his distress is real, verse 26. Let's be in no doubt about that.

He understood that John was a good man. But when it comes to the crunch, there are things more important to him than making the right response to the truth.

He doesn't want to look a fool in front of his guests. Now, in the cold light of day, it seems almost unbelievable that a man would do this.

Does it not? But think, there are a number of things which make it very hard for him to back down. Think for a moment of the relative smallness of the request.

[24 : 22] When he promised half his kingdom, he didn't really mean half his kingdom. I suspect he was just exaggerating. Had she asked for half his kingdom, the whole room would have laughed and everybody would have brushed it off.

But what she asks for is a good deal less as most kings would have estimated it in those days. A strange preacher you've had locked in your dungeon.

Everybody knows he's been a critic. A figure of fun. No one would miss him. What would the generals and government officials think of the king if he refused such a small thing?

To be seen to be saying no to an attractive young woman who's the center of attention. To be seen to protecting a man who's publicly denounced your family life. And it's not going to go down well with a wife either, is it?

Especially. How hard for a man like this to be seen publicly, to be changing his mind.

Acknowledging that he said something stupid.

[25 : 25] Admitting publicly that he didn't really mean that. He got it wrong. He was just exaggerating. I mean, think what trouble our own politicians have in doing that. They make a pledge before an election. When the time comes to deliver, it's no longer possible or even desirable to do

what they promised before the election.

But they never say, ever, I'm really sorry. I'm only human. I didn't anticipate that things would have changed. They can't do that. It's too hard to be seen to be turning around.

And so they do what they do and insist, no, we're not changing our mind. Whatever this looks like, I can assure you it is not a U-turn. How hard it is to say publicly that you got it wrong.

A man like this is always going to decide this way. Very hard to convince anyone here that he didn't promise what he promised. They all heard him.

If he doesn't deliver the head on a platter, he can't pretend he's not delivered. There's something about a head on a plate which is difficult to cover up for with anything else. He has to deliver or say publicly that he's been a bit of an idiot and drunk too much.

[26 : 39] If we think he's a caricature figure, if we think we might not do the same given a similar set of circumstances, we haven't come to terms with the power of peer pressure or the weakness of the human ego, especially, perhaps, the male ego.

Nothing has changed, friends. Nothing has changed. Becoming a Christian involves saying you've been going the wrong way and turning around. The last thing the average bloke wants is to be seen to be changing his mind publicly, especially when he's out with the boys and he's given his word and an attractive female is involved.

And it is not cool to side with the preacher, especially when he's in your dungeon. Contrast his indecision, his powerlessness with her decisive powerfulness.

Consider, he's had so long and so many opportunities to do the right thing. His wife gets only one. Couldn't have been predicted, I don't think, do you think?

I doubt she was expecting that this opportunity would present itself, but boy, was she ready for it when it came. In comes the daughter. Mum, what shall I ask for? The Baptist head now on a plate.

[28 : 04] Get out there, girl, and ask for it. Not a second's thought. He has every opportunity to do the right thing. He shilly-shallies around.

She has the most fleeting of opportunities and absolutely nails it. Let me ask the story again. Why, apart from its wonderful dramatic interest, why is this story here at this point in this gospel?

Well, I think there are two reasons. First, we find in this story an attitude to avoid. Turn on a couple of chapters to chapter eight and look at verse 15.

Here's Jesus teaching the twelve as he does all through this section of Mark's gospel. He cautioned them, 8:15, saying, Watch out.

Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. Jesus warns his disciples to watch out for, to beware, to avoid an attitude.

[29 : 18] The leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. There's something about these people, says Jesus, something that like yeast in bread affects everything about them.

Watch out for it. What is it that they're to watch out for? Well, the Pharisees are dealt with repeatedly in this gospel and we're not going to give any time to them today but Herod is only really dealt with in chapter 6.

What is it about Herod that's to be avoided? Well, the tragedy of this man, no, the folly of this man was that he failed to do the right thing for a long time and in the end found himself quite powerless to do the right thing.

Trapped by his own weakness, pride, in a situation he never imagined would happen. His biggest enemy is himself and the choices he's made.

the longer we put off doing what we know to be right, the more we weaken our resolve to do right. And of course, that's true in every part of life but not least in relation to God.

[30 : 32] C.S. Lewis says this, the safest path to hell is gently sloping, soft underfoot, no sharp turns or signposts.

We hate costly change, diversions, interruptions. And we think that somehow if we put off change just a bit longer, somehow it will be easier with a bit more reflection.

But the reality is that many people travel a long way down a gentle, soft underfoot, no sharp turns or signposts slope, and find at the point where change is demanded that they are quite unable to do it. Jesus says, watch out for that. If you're somebody here who's just looking in from the outside at the Christian message, wondering about it for yourself, well of course, find out about it, do everything you can to find out about it, but don't put off acting on what you know to be true, if you know it to be true.

For in the very putting off of acting, you make it less likely that you'll ever want to act again. If you're a Christian, maybe God's been putting his finger on something that needs to change in your life, do not put off doing something about that.

[32 : 10] Now I know what that's like, everybody does, but it is most unlikely that we'll want to do it more tomorrow or next week or next year.

It doesn't get easier to change. Waiting for it to become more convincingly true once we know it's true is never the right thing to do, because in the putting off it becomes less convincingly true. Don't let the thing you're convinced of merely be something that troubles you every time you think about it through your life as Herod was troubled, but something you never actually do anything about.

That's Herod's great tragedy, so there's an attitude to avoid here. But, and I think really much more importantly, there's an attitude to expect in this passage.

If avoidance were the only lesson, we could have had this information about Herod somewhere else in the story, maybe back in chapter one where it belongs chronologically, but now we have it here.

[33 : 25] It's at this point in the story, between the sending out of their twelfth and their happy return from all that they've been doing, why is it here that Mark includes this story?

Well, I think for this reason. The ministry of the twelve is a great beginning for them, an exciting new development in the work of Jesus, and it goes well, and that's very exciting, but the reader of this book about Jesus and his work needs to know that exciting new developments are not all there is to say about the work of Jesus.

Yes, of course, Jesus is magnificently powerful, and yes, he is going to use these twelve, not just as preachers now, but longer term, much more importantly, he's going to use these twelve as the interpreters of his work for the whole world in every age, but there is something that must not be forgotten in the excitement of this new beginning, namely, that human sinfulness is a relentless adversary to the work of Jesus and to the work of those who follow him.

This story of wavering indecision and ruthless decisiveness stuck into the narrative at this point, gives a sharp slap across the face to anyone inclined to think of the work of Jesus in triumphalistic sort of terms.

Oh yes, it will turn out well in the end, better than you can possibly imagine in the end. Victory and glory lie ahead for Jesus and for all who follow him in every age, but on the way, on the way, sin and its effects will dominate the experience both of Jesus and of those who follow him and often it will be most difficult to bear at the hands of powerful and public people who have a lot to lose from Jesus' demand that they change.

[35 : 50] And with that in mind, you can see, can't you, that Jesus meets this combination in his own earthly ministry, does he not? Think of the wavering indecision of Pontius Pilate at his trial, knowing the right thing to do, but lacking the courage.

Or think of the ruthless hostility of the religious authorities, having to wait for such a long time for an opportunity to catch Jesus, but grabbing it the minute it presents itself.

sin, both in its cowardice and its ruthless hostility, was something that the Lord Jesus experienced at first hand in full measure, just as did his forerunner, John the Baptist.

But it's not just Jesus who experienced or experiences these things. For all who follow him experience the same in holding out the life-giving message of his Lordship to humanity.

Friends, do not for a second be surprised when you meet these things. Do not be surprised when the ruthless and hostile behave ruthlessly and with hostility towards you in your service of the gospel.

[37 : 19] Do not be surprised. Jesus makes total demands over the life of every person. Some will respond to those demands with naked hostility.

Some will not miss the opportunity to take out the authentic messengers of Jesus if an opportunity presents itself. There are people around in every age just as ruthless as Herod's wife.

Sometimes we can be overwhelmed and dismayed by that kind of thing when we see it first hand and experience it first hand. There's every chance of that with us this week.

Every chance. But Mark has wisely included such an example so that even when we think things are going well we might bear in mind that some people can get very rough very quickly when they have position and public status to lose.

