

Leavening Church

Speaking truth to power (Louise Hampson)

Our Gospel this week ([Mark 6: 14-29](#)) is the harrowing tale of the murder of John the Baptist, the tragic victim of a corrupt and amoral court where 'face' mattered more than anything else. Herod's wife, Herodias, is painted as the principle villain, the one who plots to have John murdered, but no-one comes out of this well: Herod is too vain and weak-willed to refuse the outrageous request, the daughter (confusingly also called Herodias, as this name simply means 'belonging to Herod', so not really an identity at all) is too empty-headed and easily led to do anything except blindly follow her mother's instructions. Herod, we are told, 'feared John



knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him', but in this case this counted for nothing. Herod's honour was at stake: he had foolishly agreed to give the girl whatever she asked for, assuming it would be money, land or power, but could not then back out of his deal when she made her appalling choice. His 'face' mattered more than an innocent man's life. How often do we see in the global politics of our own times the same story played out? Those who challenge those in power, those who 'call out' those in authority when they behave in immoral or illegal ways, when they abuse human rights, trample justice, become corrupt and consider themselves above the law (or that they are the law!).

The image of John the Baptist's head on the platter was a popular one in medieval alabaster carvings for the [reredoses](#) which once adorned our parish churches. Popular may seem an odd word to use, but the image crops up almost as frequently as the crucifixion, so it clearly had great meaning and power for our ancestors. It was a reminder to them that power corrupts, and that true faith means sacrifice. John did not shy away from telling the powerful Herod that his life was based on a false foundation, that his marriage to Herodias was against the moral and religious codes of the day, a prohibition which still holds true today. It was, famously, the argument Henry VIII used to claim his marriage to Katherine of Aragon was invalid because she had been married to Henry's elder brother Arthur (although she claimed that marriage had never been consummated). When things do not how go the powerful and wealthy want, they try and make them fit and are in some cases, like Herod, only too ready to remove those they see as obstacles. It can be argued that this in itself betrays a deep fear: if they are so powerful, why are they bothered by these naysayers? Who would listen to these naysayers if the power of the ruler is so great? It is because they know that these people have right on their side that they are afraid, and that is a power which ultimately cannot be overcome.

Whilst individuals may fall and be sacrificed, as John was, the truth for which they stand firm cannot be blotted out: for the light was the light of the world and darkness could not overcome it. Although John was murdered, it was Herod and his family who would pay the price of sin in the end. John paid a terrible human price for his willingness to stand for truth as do countless people around the world today. Each of us has the opportunity to stand alongside those who fight for justice and for truth across the world, and to do so ourselves in our own lives in however small a way. Let us pray for the strength to do so every day.