

## **The Death of John the Baptist**

This morning we come to one of the most unsavoury stories in the Gospels, the account of how John the Baptist 'lost his head'. John was called by God to prepare the way for Jesus. He was Jesus' 'promo man' before the launch of his own ministry. But when his job has been done, we saw how God had him removed from the scene by having King Herod arrest him and take him to his palace in the fortress of Machaerus, 15 miles south west of where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea, in the region of Perea. It was an imposing fortress, almost impossible to besiege and it was Herod's favourite palace, where he felt safe and where his family lived.

His family was a mess. Herod the Great had five wives. Herod Antipas was his son by his 4th wife. His son Aristobulus by his 2nd wife, had a daughter Herodias who married her uncle, Philip, Herod's son by his third wife, and according to Jewish historian Josephus they had a daughter whose name, was Salome, although the Gospels do not name her. Antipas divorced his first wife and married his half-brother's wife Herodias, who was also his niece. There was something improper about the marriage - some scandal and John the prophet confronted the King and told him that it was not lawful for him to be living with his brother's wife.

But Herodias was furious - she had presumably left Philip to shack up with Antipas and she hated John for confronting the illegality of their liaison - and she wanted Herod to execute John, but Herod refused. Herod was sufficiently religious to fear John as a righteous and holy man so he protected him from his wife. Matthew also tells us that he was fearful of the people as they held him in high regard as a prophet. So he kept him alive in the cells and from time to time called for John to be brought to him to give him a word from God, as he recognised him to be a prophet. Mark tells us that he was puzzled by John's message, yet he liked to hear him and so from time he had John speak to him. Herod kept hearing the word of God yet did nothing to put it into practice. He was living an ungodly compromised life. He knew what was right but did not repent or do anything to rectify the situation.

Jesus told the story of the two men who built houses on foundations of rock and sand. Herod was a sand -man. No foundations, no interested of hearing God's word and putting it into practice. An opportunity came one day when Salome had danced at Herod's birthday bash and she had so pleased Herod he made the rash promise "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." The teenager asked her Mother what she should ask for, and she told her to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. We read that King Herod was 'greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her'. He could easily have refused her request as completely unacceptable - it was wrong! But rather than choose what was right, he chose not to lose face with his dinner guests and ordered John to be executed and his head presented on a plate. Any fear Herod had of John and the people was eclipse by his fear of being humiliated in front of his dinner guests, although they probably would have had more respect if he had refused. The whole issue is about going along with the crowd, pleasing others rather than doing the right thing.

In the Christianity Explored course Rico Tice uses this story in a session on Choices to challenge those doing the course not to make the wrong choice, as Herod did but to repent and follow Christ. I want us to watch the episode from the brand new course that hopefully we will be launching in the Autumn.

*DVD: Christianity Explored session: Herod.*

The challenge to us is: do we do the right thing or do we allow others to influence us to do what we know is not the way God wants us to act and behave? How much notice do we take of our friends and work colleagues and not make godly choices?

I will be away this autumn but I have loved seeing those who do not yet know the Lord 'see the light' as they have worked through the CEx course. Would you like to help in any way this autumn? Could you lead a table with a number of not-yet believers? Do you have any friends, work-colleagues, neighbours, contacts or family who you could invite; who know you are a Christian and might be open to come on a course this autumn? Begin to pray now about those who you could invite to join the next CEx course. There are many people out there who, if they were given the information and the opportunity to make the right choice they would. They do not yet follow Christ because no-one has properly given them the option to accept the Gospel or reject it. They just don't know. Pray for God to lead you to someone who needs to know and for the opportunity and boldness to invite them. Remember that knowing Jesus is a matter of life and death and you could be the very instrument God uses to bring someone eternal life.

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