

## Sermon – Trinity 6, Sunday 11 July 2021 HC St J & All Saints

Mark 6:14-29



We had new neighbours move in last week, and it seems all us Redrow residents now have something in common - everyone has ended up with their excess boxes hidden away in their garages - the things we don't want on public display but know we really need to sort out. Even at PCC this week, we had a brief tour of the cupboard space at our Church Centre; there was unanimous agreement on the need for a purge! Every now and then, we all need to have a clear out – yes, to recycle but also to take out the trash, to identify those things we need to let go of. And that is exactly one of the things today's Bible reading prompts us to do. Last Sunday we heard about Jesus' return to his home town of Nazareth, only to be rejected by the home crowd. Our Bible reading this week tells us what happened next - King Herod hears about Jesus' ministry and he is immediately fearful. Why? Because Herod has done something that comes

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back to haunt him. He had someone murdered – a holy man, John the Baptist. In hearing about Jesus, his teaching and his miracles, Herod's guilty conscience prompts him to think that Jesus is John the Baptist come back from the dead. No doubt he is also fearful of the backlash from the Jews, because Jesus and John the Baptist exercised a public ministry that contrasted with rulers like Herod, who liked lording it over people from palaces. This Herod our Gospel writer refers to is Herod Antipas. Officially he is not king – although Antipas frequently styled himself as such, which is why Mark refers to him this way. He is a 'Tetrach', a governor of ten cities appointed by the Roman Empire. Antipas' story is one of the pursuit of public power, personal title and of someone else's wife; so when John publicly challenges Herod' adultery, he also touches on issues that are politically sensitive and Antipas sends him to prison because of it, later having him murdered at his niece's request. John spoke up about rulers needing to have right morals and motives but was persecuted and martyred for living out his faith.

So what do we get from this passage? Firstly, John the Baptist's example reminds us that our Christian faith has both private and public aspects; private in the sense our faith is deeply personal to us but public in the sense that we are called to speak truth to power, a responsibility which we exercise at least with our vote. Paul Woolley, Director of the Christian political think-tank 'Theos', puts it like this '*Government is inherently a good thing, it's part of the created order, for God does not want chaos; one of the key roles of Government is to restrain evil and judge it;*

*Government sets the conditions for faith to flourish and where the common good can be realised.'* Therefore it is important that we choose wisely our leaders and government. John spoke truth to power, challenging the moral and political behaviour of the ruling class, because he knew private moral character and behaviour provided an insight into one's true values and ambitions, and spoke volumes about how we're prepared to treat others. If we're prepared to tolerate people in Government who do very dubious things in their private lives, how much more should we be concerned about their public policy? This is exactly the sort of tack that John was taking, 2000 years ago. When modern politicians style themselves as champions of the people, yet their private lives provide an alternative insight into who they really are, how they treat people and what they're prepared to do to keep their position, is it a wise use of our vote to keep them in power?



Secondly, this passage reminds us that we have responsibility to pray for Christians and people groups for whom political oppression is an everyday reality. Sadly there are so many countries where people are persecuted for their faith or for speaking truth to power. The Bishop of Tonbridge wrote last month *'Freedom died in a hail of bullets in Tianenmen Square 32 years ago, one outcome of which is the Uighur genocide. Even the words 'June the fourth' is censored in Chinese media. But the great firewall of China is helpless before intercessory prayer'* (Twitter, 4 June 2021). Christian Charity 'Open Doors' estimates

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there are 340 million Christians worldwide who suffer persecution and discrimination. As western Christians we have a responsibility to pray and support our persecuted brothers and sisters, and to pray for God to raise up just rulers who will create conditions for people, faith and planet to flourish.



Thirdly and finally, it's easy to look at other folk and judge, but closer to home, what might be that temptation be for us? There is a reason why the Lord's Prayer includes the words *'lead us not into temptation'*, because Jesus knew in our humanity, even the best of us can find dubious things enticing, be tempted to pursue short term gain at the cost of a lifetime's pain. Today's reading prompts us to think of those things we might not like to be reminded of, are keeping out of public view. Like with our garages – it seems like a good time to have a clear out! So revisit your attics, your cellars and your garages, to clear out all that is not of God. As you come to receive communion — symbolically leave the rubbish behind and receive anew God's blessing and love for you. Amen.