

Triangulations and transgressions
A sermon for the seventh Sunday after Trinity
Preached by the Dean

So forget all the lush sensuality of Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley and Richard Strauss, forget the Hollywood glamour of the dance of the seven veils, today's gospel is a painful and vicious story about the cost of discipleship and prophecy, its about abuse and family conflict, and crucially, it's a foretaste of the passion of Jesus.

Josephus, the first century historian tells us quite a lot about the Herod family who taste for murder, lust and revenge would make the Macbeths look like models of domestic bliss. The context for today's instalment of the bad, the bad and the ugly is that Herod Antipas, son of baby murdering Herod the so called 'Great', fuelled both by lust, but I am sure also with the delicious prospect of infuriating his half-brother also called Herod (keep up!) he enticed Herod's wife Herodias away from her husband, and sent his own wife packing, back to her father, who subsequently declared war... still with me?

Such shenanigans were bound to attract unwelcome attention, and John the baptiser, never one to mince his words, seem to have fulfilled his prophetic mandate of speaking truth to power, for which he was rewarded with imprisonment at Herod's fortress palace Macheraeus, and the setting for the grisly Birthday party.

On the evening of the party, triangulations and transgressions abound. The first transgression is in Herod deciding to have a Birthday party in the first place! For Jews of this time, this celebration of oneself would have been unthinkable, so those present as guests would presumably have been happy enough to ignore the customs around humility before God.

And then there is the transgression of a female child dancing for the guests. Mark's word for the daughter of Herodias is that she was a *korasion* which means a young girl, before the age of betrothal, so pre-pubescent. To have required not just a female Jew, but a young girl to dance before drunken men, some of them undoubtedly Gentile wasn't just abusive as we would understand but the utmost offence to her purity and humanity.

And then there are the triangulations: Herod, Herodias and John, Herod, Herodias and her daughter, and on the larger landscape, Herod, the religious authorities and John (and all that he represents).

Herod is disconcerted but fascinated by John: offended, yet worried by John's condemnation of him, and drawn to keep listening to his voice echoing from the depths, the voice of his conscience. Knowing what is right and attracted to it, even when we don't want to do it...

And there's Herodias, not in the slightest bit drawn to the prophet, just wanting him out of the way and his uncomfortable truths silenced.

And the second triangulation; has Herodias forced the girl to dance before Herod and his lords, and if so, why? Has Herod required it, and if so, why, and how does it make mother and daughter feel? If Herod is stimulated by the dance enough to promise the

girl whatever she wants, even up to half of his kingdom, then it seems that lust is present. And for Herodias to see her newish husband lusting after his stepdaughter...?

And the framing triangulation, which arises from what looks like the answer to the question; why does Mark tell us this story? Why is it important? That we have in John a prophet regarded highly both by the contemporary religious authorities but also heralding Jesus' own ministry; the last and greatest of the prophets, both revealing in his predicament what happens to prophets when they speak the uncomfortable truth, but also, and I think *this* is why Mark includes it in his narrative, providing a glimpse, a foretaste of the suffering and death of Jesus himself. Political and religious power, and the willing victim who bears the cost and pays the price.

What happens in triangulated relationships, as most of us know from our own experience, is that a conflict between two parties can often be defused by victimising a third party. You will have found this if you have ever tried to intervene in a marital argument or a row between friends. More often than not, they end up turning on you for your pains!

It works in tribes, nations and cultures. Social strife can often be harmonised if a group can be found who can be safely blamed. Some political leaders are adept and deflecting the anger of a disappointed electorate by blaming the alien in their midst, or another country, or ethnic minority. We avoid having to deal with the root causes of our own dis-ease, accepting the consequences of our actions and failures by deflecting the blame on to someone or something else.

Some theologians have argued that central to what is happening on Good Friday and the whole understanding of the work of Jesus is that he comes to take upon himself the burden of our alienated relationship with God. We have for millenia tried to placate a remote and angry God with sacrifices, with religious wars, with a vain attempt to persuade ourselves that God is on our side, not on theirs, when what Jesus lived, died and rose again to show us was a complete re-framing of how we understand God and us. In Jesus, God takes on himself the victimhood, allows himself to become the focus of anger and hatred; on the cross takes it all on to his heart of love, and on Easter Day reveals Love's unquenchable power to absorb the worst we can be and do, and to irradiate it with resurrection life and love.

And today's gospel shows us how all of our transgressions, triangulations, alienations are met, summed up and overcome in the power of the cross. The squalid, bleak and frankly nasty story of Herod, Herodias and the killing of John The Baptist, although nowhere near our every day experience, asks us a searching question about our own relationships, motives, tendency to victimise others, and then points us towards the one place where we can lay down the burdens of our conflicted selves, and find healing mercy and restoration.

This is the healing we offer to a world still in love with the siren song of violence, power and the temptation to take sides. Here is the place where we gather at an altar for a fragment of bread, a sip of wine and find ourselves all equal, all welcomed home, all restored and loved in the heart of God.