

Sermon on the beheading of John the Baptist
S Dallas July 2021

Have you ever gone along with something despite feeling, deep down, that it wasn't right?

Have you ever wanted speak up about something, but in the end, you felt a bit hesitant?

Have you ever said to yourself, well if everyone else is going along with this, it must be OK. Anyway, it's not really my problem. If this goes wrong, someone else can deal with it.

I think probably many of us can relate to these scenarios.

So imagine what it must have felt like to have been a guest at Herod's party, in this shocking scene from today's Gospel.

There you are, at the party, watching a drunken king telling his step-daughter, who has just danced for him, that he will give her anything she asks for – even half his kingdom.

Imagine watching as the girl rushes off to find out from her mother what she should ask for.

Then everyone's reaction as she returns with a terrifying demand: the head of a holy man, John the Baptist, his head on a platter.

The party probably goes suddenly quiet. This is not the request anyone was expecting. King Herod looks uncomfortable. He knows his wife hates John the Baptist. But killing him has never been part of the plan.

What is Herod going to do?

What are the guests going to do? Is anyone going to say anything? Is anyone going to step up and say: sorry, but I think this has gone a bit far, let's have a re-think!

But no one does that, as far as we know. Perhaps no one feels it is their place to. Perhaps no one wants to rock the boat, for fear of the consequences for themselves if they do.

Herod himself is too scared to back down. He's made a promise in front of lots of people and he feels he has to see it through.

And so the horrifying deed is done.

I wonder how the guests at Herod's party felt as they went home that night, knowing they had gone along with the beheading of a brave and truthful man?

Of course, we know the story doesn't end there.

Because as John's severed head falls to the floor that night, another preacher in Judea is just getting started. A relative of John, a man who definitely does speak up. A man who never goes along with the crowd. A man whose radical teachings are destined to ripple out across many centuries to meet us today as fresh and as urgent as ever.

And our stories don't end either when we fail, time and again, to do the right thing, to set aside our personal self for the good of others.

Because as we face our weaknesses together here in church every week, safe in the company of each other, there is the chance to align ourselves once again with the goodness and love of Christ; the chance again for each of us to become the person we are called to be.

So that one day, if and when we need to speak up, or do what we know is right, we do so fearlessly, with the clarity of love.

AMEN.