



**SAINT JAMES'**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
Fremont, California

## SERMON

12 July, 2009. Pentecost 6, Proper 9  
Title: " . . . On Being God's People "  
Text: St. Mark 6:14-29

J.J.



John the Baptist

One of the challenges that we Episcopalians have is that we can easily make automatic responses to liturgical phrases or expressions. I have learned as an Episcopal priest, that if I want to get your attention without having to shout you down, I just have to say: "God be with you" and you all dutifully respond: "and also with you," and almost (notice, I said almost) . . . almost everyone is quiet. Or if some one says: "The Word of the Lord," we automatically respond: "Thanks be to God!" And we did that again, today, with the reading of the Gospel. When Kathy announced: "The Gospel of the Lord," I had to catch myself from saying "Praise to you, Lord Christ," like some kind of robot. But frankly, serving the head of John the Baptist on a platter is not something for which I want to give thanks or to praise God. And, I must share with you, that as I began the preparation for today's sermon, I really struggled with what this Word of God was trying to say to us. At

first, I thought I would preach on one of the other readings (that is permissible within the Episcopal Church), but as I looked at them, they didn't seem to be much better—King David dancing around the Ark of the Covenant (I like my name sake, but really . . .) and those opening words from the Epistle to the Church at Ephesus . . . seemed like the author, whoever he was, as trying to cram the entire Book of Common Prayer into twelve verses. I was tempted to go "topical," that is, to focus on an important issue that might be facing us as a Parish, and especially during this interim time (and God knows, there are a number of things we could talk about), but being the Churchman that I am, I decided to go back to the Gospel and give it one more try. And, that's when it caught my eye. The Gospel is not really talking about the death of John the Baptist (even though that seems to be the focus what with erotic dancing and heads on platters). But no, the focus is really on King Herod, and his flashback to what he had done, and what might almost be considered his remorse over his dastardly deed. The Gospel reading opens with King Herod wrestling with who this Jesus was and his conclusion that this was "John, whom I beheaded . . . who has been raised" and his great respect for John and what John had said: "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man" . . . and Herod, "the King was deeply grieved. So, what was it that John said and did that so caught Herod's attention? This year, I've had the privilege of preaching about John the Baptist on three different occasions. Today, and way back last Advent when we heard John calling us to [SING] "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," and a couple of weeks ago, on June 24<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist at our Wednesday morning Eucharist. At that service, I focused on the Prayer of the Day, a prayer which wonderfully summarizes John's entire message . . . a word that caught the attention and respect of King Herod, and a message that is important for you and for me. Now, if you were one of the half dozen or so who people who were at that service and heard these words, I somewhat apologize, but I think it's a prayer worthy of repeating for all of us to hear:

Almighty God, by whose providence your servant John the Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of your Son our Savior by preaching repentance: Make us so to follow his teaching and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and, following his example, constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

As I read this Gospel, I thought that King Herod was probably thinking about John's preaching:

- To repent, that is to turn himself around
- To speak the truth boldly
- To rebuke "vice" . . . (perhaps better said: "to rebuke injustice and wrong doing"), and
- To patiently suffer (and, again, better said) "to stand up for what is right.

Today's Gospel, however, is not about John the Baptist . . . it is not about King Herod and his flashback and remorse . . . no, today's Gospel—like every Gospel reading—is about you and me. And what the Gospel is calling us to be and to do:

- To repent, that is to turn around our way of living and live as the children of God.
- To speak the truth boldly
- To rebuke injustice and wrong doing, and
- To stand up for what is right.

That is a very important Word of God for us, we here at St. James, that is a very important Word of God for us to hear, especially during this interim as we reflect upon who we are as the people of God at this place and at this time. It is important as we go through our process of discernment that we turn ourselves around from our past if and where that is necessary . . . that we speak the truth to one another clearly and boldly (I am going to talk about that in my "ViewPoint" article in the August Newsletter), that we strive to work for justice and stand up for what is right. That is crucial for the task ahead of us, as we and the members of our Transition Team prepare our Parish Profile, that is as we develop a picture, a portrait, of who we really are . . . and not a snapshot or an image of what we would like to be or who we think we are . . . but an accurate representation of who in fact we are as the people of God at this time and in this place. Now, I know that is exactly what the Transition Team is striving to do, but they can only do it as we ourselves turn around, as necessary (let me underscore that, as necessary), speak the truth, rebuke wrong doing and stand up for what is right.

That was the message of John the Baptist . . . and it cost him his head. That was the message that came to King Herod . . . and in a few short years it cost him his throne. And that is God's message for us. And what is the cost for us? What is at stake? Being God's people at this time and in this place. Amen.

S.D.G.

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