



## Matthew 14:1–12

14 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, 2 and he said to his attendants, “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” 3 Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, 4 for John had been saying to him: “It is not lawful for you to have her.” 5 Herod wanted to kill

John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet. 6 On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much 7 that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. 8 Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." 9 The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted 10 and had John beheaded in the prison. 11 His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. 12 John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

## Reflection

In today's passage Matthew offers a fascinating, if somewhat gruesome, historical flashback into the world in which Jesus walked. After recording Jesus' own hometown rejecting him at the end of chapter 13, Matthew now shares with us the fate of Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist. It's ominous, he too was rejected, then he was killed.

The scene is one of drunken debauchery, courtroom intrigue, cowardice, pride and political conniving. The occasion is Herod's birthday. The characters include the wicked Herod Antipas, you'll remember his father, Herod the Great who, in Matthew 2, thirty years ago, ordered the

wholesale slaughter of all the two years old boys from Jesus' hometown. Herod Antipas was much weaker than his father, but he was just as wicked, the apple did not fall far from the tree. He'd seduced his brother Philip's wife, who was married at the time, so was he, he'd divorced his wife of 15 years to have her. It was all lust, politically it brought about his downfall, but he had to have her. Her name's Herodias, a wicked, vengeful woman. Then there's Salome, Herodias' daughter, we know her name thanks to the Jewish historian Josephus, she's barely in her early teens; already corrupted at her young age by her evil mother. The other characters include the sensuous friends of Herod. And against them all is John the Baptist, he's been in Herod's dungeons for at least a year now. John was imprisoned for speak-

ing out about Herod's relationship with his brother's wife which was already a political tinderbox, but one wonders if Herodias' scorn wasn't the main driver behind his incarceration. After all, how dare John keep pointing out that their marriage wasn't legitimate? Worst still, he kept accusing them of incest according to the Old Testament book of the bible, Leviticus. The only reason John hadn't been executed was because Herod was a weak man, as we'll see in our passage today.

It's Herod's birthday, the wine is flowing and we don't have to read too far between the lines to piece together this debauched scene. Perhaps Herodias arranged the party for Herod, and invited all his friends. There's feasting and drinking, it's a male dominated environment. Female

dancers would not have been unusual, the dancing would have been sensuous, only they would have been slave girls, not the daughter of a king. Salome wouldn't likely have been more than 14 years of age, she wasn't Herod's daughter, she was Herodias' daughter by his brother Philip, a child sent out to dance provocatively amongst drunken men so she could trap her stepfather and please her wicked mother. Everyone was pleased, even Herod, until that same child asked for a severed head on a platter. He then realised that he'd been tricked by his wife. You can imagine him sobering up in an instant as it dawned on him what had just happened. His wicked mind began to weigh the pros and cons of what he was about to do. 'Killing John the Baptist might cause a riot, and it was against the law, but I can't back down now,

I'll look weak.' And so, weak and insecure man that we was, he gave the order, and in a grisly scene he had John the Baptist's head brought on a platter and handed to his daughter, who ran off to present it to his conniving wife.

This passage opens our eyes to the times in which Jesus walked. John's execution was an outrage under both Roman and Jewish law but that didn't give Herod even a moment's pause. John was a prophet, well loved by the people yet Herod had his head cut off as a form of dinner entertainment for his guests. And here's Jesus walking around claiming to be the rightful king of the Jews. Matthew's giving us a sense of the danger that Jesus is in, and the violence of the world in which he walked. Soon it will be Jesus' turn to come before

Herod. There's confrontation coming in this world of merciless decapitation, this world of the blood lust of the arena, this world where insurrectionists who rose up against Roman rule were crucified, cross after cross lining the sides of the major highways, for all to see the fate of anyone who would dare suggest that there is any other king than Caesar.

By way of final reflection did you notice how this passage opens? Herod hears reports of Jesus and exclaims that John, whom he killed, has risen from the dead. This is an extraordinary statement on its own, but especially so when you consider that Herod was a Sadducee, a member of a Jewish sect who did not believe in resurrection. It's amazing the power of a guilty conscience. The way one sin leads



to another. Lust, adultery, incest, murder, then eaten up by a guilty conscience and jumping at shadows. Even the wicked king Herod can't seem to escape his conscience.

## **Think**

Please take some time now to re-read this sordid tale and reflect over what it reveals of human nature. Matthew is offering us two comparisons to consider. Firstly, he's comparing the bravery and righteousness of John the Baptist, who's bold and fearless; with Herod who's a wicked fool. On another level, this is a story of two kings. King Herod and King Jesus. Consider the depravity of Herod and then consider the righteousness of Jesus. What's Matthew teaching us with this contrast? How do

you feel about having a king like Jesus?

Perhaps you're in a position of authority. Where do you lie on the spectrum between Herod and Jesus? Are you tempted to make ethical compromises, to take the easy way out, to save face? How would Jesus use the authority that you've been given?

## **Pray**

Then spend some time praying. Perhaps pray for the government of our land. For those in power. That they would lead our country with Christlike righteousness, and servant-heartedness, upholding justice and truth. If you have time, and along these lines, why not pray through Romans 13 verses 1–7?