

John the Baptist, Herod and moral weakness: Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison at All Saints' church, Nottingham, July 15th 2018 (Trinity 7)

Today's gospel reading describes the death of John the Baptist. John had been imprisoned by Herod Antipas for having rebuked him for taking the wife of his brother, Herod II. This wife was Herodias. We hear how the daughter of Herodias – generally assumed to be Salome - danced for Herod Antipas; the reward which she demanded for doing this, prompted by Herodias, was to be given the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod reluctantly agreed; he had recognised John as a holy man, and had even been protecting him, but he had to fulfil his promise to allow the scheming Herodias to have whatever she wanted. He also did not want to lose face in the presence of his guests, and so he reluctantly had John killed.

Was this an example of moral weakness on Herod's part? He knew it wasn't right to have John killed, and yet he still went ahead. It was entirely up to him whether to have him killed or spared, but he decided on the former, preferring to keep his word to Herodias and not to be seen by his guests as fickle and changeable, instead of continuing the protection he had been giving to John out of respect for him.

Let's look at two other examples of moral weakness in the gospels, and reflect upon them.

- When St Peter asked whether he was one of Jesus' disciples, he disowned him three times. Like Herod, he had the choice; yet he opted to distance himself from the one who was his Lord and Master, in the interests of insulating himself from danger. He let Jesus down; he failed him. Fear was no doubt a key element in Peter's moral weakness.

- When Pontius Pilate decided not to release Jesus, he offloaded the responsibility of the decision onto the crowd, asking them whom they wished him to release. He famously washed his hands of the matter, even though he clearly had his doubts as to whether what he was doing was the right thing. Remember too that Pilate's wife saw Jesus as a good man, and told her husband that he was innocent. Pilate showed moral weakness because he feared the Jewish religious leaders, even though he was the governor and had supreme authority; he wanted to remain on good terms with them and probably felt he needed their support and co-operation in other areas of his work.

Herod, Peter, Pontius Pilate: all three are examples of people who knew what was right but did not do it. Various factors were involved, including fear, pragmatism, and expediency. In two of the three cases a human life was lost as a consequence; other factors were seen as more important than the preservation of life. In all cases we get the feeling that the person making the decision was pulled in different directions; they knew what the higher moral way should have been, but for whatever reason could not follow it. They were unwilling or unable to do so; they had the opportunity to let others suffer the consequences of their decision, rather than themselves, and so they went ahead on that basis. Herod would have had to face ridicule from his guests and the anger of Herodias. Pilate would have had to find ways of quietening down the demands of the chief priests if he had had Jesus released. Peter left Christ to face torture and death alone, rather than exposing himself to the same possible fate.

Moral weakness is a specific category of what we in the Church refer to as 'sin'. The Book of Common Prayer Confession divides sin into errors of 'thought, word and deed' (thinking, speaking, doing); each of these leads on to the next, in a scale of increasing severity of offence. Interestingly, the Confession in the modern language version of the Eucharist focuses only on sinful deeds, omitting any mention of thought and word. In that Confession we ask for God's forgiveness of those sins which we commit through 'negligence, weakness, and our own deliberate fault'. Here again, there is a scale of increasing severity; first we have 'omitting or neglecting to do something' ('sins of omission'), followed by 'sins of commission', in other words wrong deeds which we actually do, both as a result of weakness (because we don't have the ability or strength to avoid such sins) and then those wrong deeds that we do deliberately and knowingly.

Sins committed as a result of moral weakness fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. They are sins not of negligence or omission; they are not cold blooded, determinedly evil, sins committed out of hardness of heart, but sins that take place in spite of our agonising over the pros and cons, the rights and wrongs, and occur because many moral decisions are hugely complex, with no solution which is totally right or totally wrong. And of course the complexity of such moral decisions increases in accordance with the number of factors which are involved, each of which carries a moral dimension (recall, for example, the various competing and conflicting moral demands which Herod Antipas faced).

It might be argued, however, by someone who perhaps did not come to such issues from a Christian background, that there is no such thing as moral weakness. Herod, for example, simply did what was in his own interests as a king, and that was that; his moral priority was to preserve his authority, whatever the costs and consequences to others. Pilate, similarly, could well have seen his role as being above all to keep the peace and minimise the risk of social unrest. If this meant colluding with oppressive and unjust local leaders, so be it. Politics is about pragmatism and expediency and morality does not come into it. Peter, similarly, could be said to have acted ethically if one believes that even lies and disloyalty can be justified when one's own safety and indeed perhaps one's very life are threatened.

What this all reveals, then, is that any concept of moral weakness presupposes that there are certain values which should be protected and defended at all costs. In our faith, for example, such values include love, mercy, justice, the sanctity of human life, and our belief that each person in some manner reflects the image and likeness of God. Now of course it's not easy to define each of these, or where to strike the balance if more than one of them is involved in a particular moral decision (such as, for example, when justice appears to require a combination of punishment and mercy, but it's not clear just how the scales should be tilted).

If, in the three examples we've been looking at, the individuals concerned had taken one of these Christian values as non-negotiable, then the outcome in each case could have very different. If Pilate and Herod had made a priority of the sanctity of life, then this would have been seen as an illustration of moral strength. If Peter had been able to demonstrate his love for Jesus by not disowning him, then this would also have demonstrated massive moral strength.

What is emerging from all this is that moral strength almost always involves a cost and sacrifice to the person who is making the decision in question. That's why we describe it as strength. Think of the person in the workplace who has the determination and resolve to become a whistleblower in the face of a cover up, or some other form of unethical or illegal practice. They may well not be rewarded for this risky course of action, but their conscience tells them they have to put self-preservation to one side in the interests of the greater good. Consider also the moral strength of the person who has the courage to resign from a well paid job when it emerges that they are being forced to act deceitfully, or with lack of transparency, or to take advantage of their company's position to exploit suppliers, workers, or customers.

Similarly, we should also admire the moral strength of the politician who refrains from the temptation to give attractive sounding but unrealistic promises, even though he or she knows that this would be likely to win votes. Consider, also, the person who takes a stand against workplace practices which are not family-friendly, even though there is pressure on them from others in the organisation to comply with working patterns which do not respect the needs of employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

All this, I hope, will encourage you to take a step back, from time to time, when you realise that you are involved in a tricky situation which involves difficult moral decisions. Don't necessarily just opt, like Herod or Pilate, for the easiest and least costly way out. Think twice before automatically putting self-interest or even self-preservation first, like St Peter. Instead, ask God to give you the moral, mental and spiritual strength to make sure that our Christian values are reflected as fully as possible, and to the best of your ability, in the decision that you make. If there is a cost to you, see it as your contribution to the greater good, regard it as an act of witness to our Christian faith, and make it something that you are doing to for the glory of God. Amen.