

Readings for the Commemoration of the Beheading of John the Baptist

27th August 2023

First Reading: 2 Chronicles 24:17-21

After the death of Jehoiada the officials of Judah came and did obeisance to the king; then the king listened to them. They abandoned the house of the LORD, the God of their ancestors, and served the sacred poles and the idols. And wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this guilt of theirs. Yet he sent prophets among them to bring them back to the LORD; they testified against them, but they would not listen.

Then the spirit of God took possession of Zechariah son of the priest Jehoiada; he stood above the people and said to them, "Thus says God: Why do you transgress the commandments of the LORD, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, he has also forsaken you." But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him to death in the court of the house of the LORD.

Second Reading: Hebrews 11:32-40

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Gospel: St Mark 16:17-29

Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the Baptist." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king

sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

A Reflection on the Commemoration of the Beheading of John the Baptist

From Ven John Green

A recent report expressed concern at a 13% increase in reports of people driving the wrong way on motorways. Among the reasons listed for such potentially disastrous behaviour was the tendency for people to slavishly follow instructions from a satnav without thinking, determined to obey the last command even if it meant ignoring signs warning of the danger.

We humans like to kid ourselves that we are reasonable, rational beings; that we have good reasons for the things we do and choices we make. However, there's a mountain of evidence to the contrary with, apparently, no end of things conspiring to stop us considering our actions and their consequences, or from following the values that we say are close to our hearts.

In August 1961, the American psychologist Stanley Milgram began a series of experiments to see how obedient people would be to an authority figure, following instructions that would conflict with their personal conscience. Forty men from a range of backgrounds were led to believe that they were assisting an experiment – actually unrelated to the one in which they were actually being observed. As part of the staged experiment they had to administer electric shocks to a "learner" who was actually played by an actor. These fake electric shocks were slowly increased to levels that would have been fatal had they been real, with the actor behaving accordingly. Surprisingly, Milgram found that a very high proportion of participants obeyed instructions fully – with 65% following orders all the way to the top of the scale – a 'shock' of 450 volts.

But we don't need a laboratory to show how fickle and irrational humans can be. History is littered with accounts of seemingly decent, peace-loving people committing unthinkable acts. From the actions of vigilantes and mobs at local level, through civil war to international armed conflicts, there are countless examples of inhumanity committed by seemingly decent, humane people.

But if history is darkened by examples of how unthinking and inhumane we're capable of being, it's also illuminated by individuals who manage to combine an amazing grasp of events with the courage to speak out about them. Of course, plenty of people are prepared to speak out controversially, even if they've nothing to say, and there are a good many people who have a grasp of the way that history is unfolding. However, when clarity of vision and the courage to speak out come together with a natural authority – you might say 'calling' – then a prophet is born.

Much of our Old Testament centres on the ministry of those who God called to speak prophetically to Israel. If there's a golden thread running through their utterances it's along the lines of, "Wake up! You're heading for disaster! Turn back and follow God." And, with his message of repentance at the coming of the Messiah, John the Baptist is often regarded as the fulfilment of that prophetic tradition, the greatest among the prophets.

Although he had a significant following, like his prophetic predecessors, John was not an easy or comfortable person. Indeed, the whole point (or edge) of a prophet is about making people feel uncomfortable and shaking them out of complacency. Like many of the Old Testament prophets, his ministry involved speaking truth to power – a calling that literally cost him his head, as the Church remembers at this time of year.

To me, remembering John and the love-hate relationship that he had with his hearers, is a reminder of how much we continue to need prophetic voices, but how resentful we can be of them. Of course, we have prophetic words from scripture to guide us, but I believe we also sorely need contemporary prophets to keep us from sleep-walking into disaster. In fact, I think one way of judging the health of a society is how we deal with those who'd prophecy to us. Of course, there has always been the need to discern false prophets, but in order to do that first we need to listen.

While I sense in many people a growing anxiety about the future, faced with threats like climate change and economic instability, I also sense an unwillingness to listen to uncomfortable truths. I can't help but feel we need a prophetic voice to unite us in turning away from disaster but, it seems, we're more and more inclined simply to dismiss or shut-down those whose views make us feel uncomfortable or with which we disagree. Indeed, recent legislation has criminalised peaceful protest, making it an offence to inconvenience people or, presumably, to make them feel uncomfortable.

It's tempting to blame an increasingly amoral and incompetent political class for our woes, or trot out the usual argument that so-called social media has made us anti-social. But, perhaps that's why each of us needs to be challenged afresh by prophetic voices like John the Baptist, who reminds us of that most uncomfortable truth that repentance doesn't begin with other people, but with each of us.