

Sunday 11 July 2021 - Trinity 6

Sermon Notes

The death of John the Baptist

Opening comments

- Why is it that, in some current news bulletins, particular news items are given prominence and time which they don't seem to deserve?
- Similarly, why does Mark give so much emphasis and space to the rather sordid account of events leading up to John's execution?

Two possible reasons, out of many, for the prominence of Mark's account

- Mark saw John's death as a pointer towards what lay ahead for Jesus. Parallels include the effectiveness of their preaching, a large following, good and Godly men, falling foul of the hierarchy, unjustified execution.
- When Mark wrote his Gospel, John's followers were still a separate and identifiable group. Implies that John's impact was greater and longer lasting than even Gospels suggest. Luke reports this in Acts 18:25-19:5.

John's background and impact

- Born into priestly family (Luke 1:5). Normal expectation would be for him to follow his father Zechariah's calling and become a priest also. This would have been a secure job for life offering status in the community.
- If he felt people's attitudes needed changing, he could have taken the easy option of joining the hierarchy and trying to change things from within.
- He didn't. He became the 'voice crying in the wilderness' (Mark 1:3), challenging not only the people but the religious hierarchy and the secular power as well.
- Doing that he placed himself in the long line of the OT prophets, outsiders one and all - ignored, bullied and threatened, sometimes fleeing for their lives.
- Jesus recognised John as such a prophet, describing him as Elijah returned (Mark 9:13).
- So John formed an important link between the OT and Jesus: the whole Bible as a single narrative of salvation.

What can we learn about prophecy in our world?

- Prophecy not about predicting the future (though the OT prophets often did that about Jesus), rather about speaking truth to power - the reason for John's downfall.
- In some Christian denominations, prophecy a key element of worship (see Paul's instructions to the early church in 1 Corinthians 14:29-33). Probably not go down well in most Anglican churches.
- Hard for the church *as an institution* to be prophetic: prophecy is the realm of the individual, that is you and me.

- All have families, friends, work colleagues, or those we meet in charitable work or other activities. With them prophecy could be, if they're not already Christians, simply telling them why our faith is important to us.
- But also we have to speak truth to power - to organisations we work for, to parish council, district council, MPs. Likely to be sidelined. So for example on euthanasia or abortion: You would say that wouldn't you. Answer: yes I would and this is why.
- John the Baptist not the easiest of examples to follow - but what he did was done in accordance first with God's will for the world, and then to prepare the way and witness to Jesus, God's son and anointed one.
- We should have confidence to be that kind of prophet too.

JRE / 5.7.21