

The opportune time

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[0 : 00] Right, it's been a little while since we've been looking at this and just to remind you what's been happening in Mark's Gospel very very quickly.! It says that Jesus is coming right at the beginning in the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ the Son of God.

It's written in the prophet Isaiah, I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way. A voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the Lord make straight paths for him. So John the Baptist came promising that after him would come the Lord.

And Jesus arrives and we begin to get fascinated by the sort of person Jesus is, the sort of program that he has, the sort of things that he does.

And there's these snapshots of things that once he does this and that once he does that. And you have a sequence of illustrations or snapshots of his, particularly of his authority.

The announcement says that the kingdom of God is at hand and then you start to see what it's like if the king is there. So you get Satan demons cast out, you get the leper cleansed, you get sins forgiven, you get sinners called.

[1 : 21] So you get that in the first two or three chapters and then you get some teaching. And then you get another, perhaps a slightly longer set of incidents that are full of implications and again pose the question, who is Jesus?

What is his power? How are we to relate to him? And right at the beginning of the gospel, he is very, very popular. So popular that he's got no room to breathe really.

People just falling over themselves to come and hear what he has to say. But as things develop, we find that there are notes of opposition and rejection. So he's been accepted with popularity.

But in the chapters that we were looking at last time, we began to see rejection. So in the beginning of chapter 6, you have him going to his hometown.

And people have this amazement, but they start to ask in chapter 6, verse 2, where did this man get these things?

[2 : 28] What's this wisdom that's been given to him that he even does miracles? And they begin to say, well, he's just the lad from around the corner. And his familiarity becomes a stumbling block.

And it says they take offense at him. And so Jesus encounters rejection. And in this context, he sends out the 12.

This is chapter 6, verses 7, 8, and onwards. So Jesus' ministry begins to go up a notch as he sends people out to go around to different places to circulate.

And they sort of replicate the ministry of Jesus in the various villages around. And so that's the bit of the sandwich that we're in.

So they are going out. And we're wondering what response they get. In verse 30, the apostles gather around Jesus and report to him all that they had done and taught.

[3 : 30] So that's where we're at very briefly. And in the middle of the sandwich, the bit that was read, we find what the response is.

We're not going now into villages. We're in the seat of power. King Herod and his palace and his parties and his mates.

And that's what we're going to look at. And I think, to be honest, I've only got one or two points to make. So it would be good of me not to wrap them up with a huge number of words. But let's see what this...

What's this going to show us? It will show us how the gospel was received among what they would have called the great and the good. I don't think they're particularly good.

I'm not sure they're particularly great either. But you see the list of them. In verse 21, on his birthday, Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.

[4 : 33] So they're the top people. It would be Sir, so-and-so, so-and-so. A few MPs would be there. You know, the notable people. Probably somebody who'd been a finalist in the great British Bake Off or something like that, they would have...

Or the Jewish Bake Off or the Galilee Bake Off. All the great and the good people would have been there. So it shows us that. It also shows us, in passing, what Jesus' public image was in verse 14. Because what were people saying about Jesus at this stage in his ministry? Some were saying, verse 14, some were saying, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead.

That's why miraculous powers are at work in him. You know, there's no shortage of willingness to believe in supernatural things. It's almost a bit superstitious, isn't it?

There's no shortage of willingness to believe in supernatural things. But willingness to believe in supernatural things isn't the same thing as believing in Jesus. It's just not...

[5 : 42] Excuse me one moment. I'll take this off. Verse 15. Others are saying, here's Elijah. So this is a reference to one of the famous prophets in the Old Testament.

So the days of Elijah have come back. These great, powerful, revival, influential preachers. And then others are saying, verse 15, he is a prophet like one of the prophets of long ago.

So these are the ideas that people have. What's Jesus' public image? They're not totally clear, are they? It's John the Baptist resurrected somehow.

It's Elijah, one of the great prophets, one of the great figures from the past. Or one of the prophets like in the Old Testament. So that's Jesus' public image.

Not entirely clear, are they? Another thing that it shows us is the... It forewarns us of the cost of spreading the gospel for faithful witnesses.

[6 : 49] So it sounds a very jarring note in that we've had a lot of popularity for Jesus. And then here we get this sort of jarring note. Here is John the Baptist who's been totally faithful, totally courageous, totally straight.

And what does he get for his troubles? Well, he gets his head cut off. And it sounds a little bit of a warning note. What will happen, well, to other followers?

In particular, what will happen to Jesus? And there are quite a few sort of echoes of what will happen to Jesus. For example, verse 29. When John has been decapitated, the disciples come and take his body and lay it in a tomb.

Well, that's what will happen to Jesus, isn't it? And some of his followers will come and take his body and lay it in a tomb. For John the Baptist, Herod thought he'd well and truly solved the problem.

Although it did come back to haunt him, as it were. But when Jesus was laid in a tomb, that really was only just the beginning, wasn't it? Do you agree with me?

[8 : 00] When Jesus' body was laid in the tomb, that wasn't the end. That was sort of just the beginning. And the thing that I'd like us to think about this evening, it gives us a really dramatic illustration of the dangers of spiritual paralysis.

It's really a very dramatic and colourful illustration of that. So when Dick Lucas gave his lectures on this, he said something like, well, isn't it amazing?

Isn't it amazing to see this example of first century preaching lifted straight from the mouths of the preacher onto the page of Mark's Gospel? Or something like that is what he said.

So let's, just a couple of other things. To note that the story is told via flashback. Did you notice that? Where we are at in verses 14, 15, 16, is what do they make of Jesus?

And somebody, they're saying, well, it could be John the Baptist. And Herod is saying, yeah, it is John the Baptist. I feel in my guts, this is John the Baptist come back to haunt me.

[9 : 11] The man I beheaded has been raised from the dead. And then we get the flashback. It doesn't go on in time order, does it? It flashes back to how he came to behead John the Baptist.

So that's just a notice. That's the way the narration goes. And then also, would you mind noticing there are some speed markers?

They turn out to be quite important. But notice them. Verse 25, at once. There's a Greek word. There's a couple of Greek words quite similar.

Ephthys and ephthios, which mean immediately. And they're in here. Verse 25, at once. And you do notice this. I want you to give me right now.

And verse 27, immediately he sent an executioner. So notice that, and actually in verse 25, the girl hurried. It says, with speed.

[10:15] So there are a number of indications of the velocity of the narrative of the story in there, which turn out to be quite important later.

So here, I've just got a couple of screens to take us through this story. So here we are in verse 17. Going back, and in a flashback, Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and had him bound and put in prison. And then we flash back again. Why did he do that?

Well, he did it because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. Now, I didn't have time to do a lot of homework on Herodias.

But what I see of her, I really would have advised him to marry someone else. I wouldn't, do you, do you, do you get, I don't like her at all.

[11:12] I don't like her at all. There is some, so on Facebook, Herodias, it would have said, you know, there's a button, married, single, it's complicated. This one would have been, it's complicated.

Because she had married, another member of this family, and one of the commentaries has got a, a sort of family tree, and it's got lines going all over the place, of people who divorced somebody else, and married their stepdaughter, and step sister, and just, it's just totally, totally complicated.

And they've all got the same name as well, which just, I don't think, baffles me completely. She divorced her husband, Philip. Now then, in Jewish law, you're not, women are not allowed to divorce their husbands.

So, you know, that is a, she's, she's outside Jewish tradition, straight away. In Roman law, it was permissible. But now we're talking about, the Roman law, which, is really all over the place.

If we think that our, current laws of marriage, are a bit off beam, that they're really nothing, compared with how things were, in Roman society. She, so she divorced, Philip, who had another name.

[12:36] Josephus refers to him, by another name. Okay, it just gets very, very complicated. So she marries this chap, Herod, who himself was already married. So he divorced, his wife, in order to marry, his brother's wife.

His brother hadn't died, his brother was still alive. I think it was his half brother, or something like that. Very complicated. And, when, Herod, Antipas, divorced his wife, if I got this correct, she was, the daughter of the king, of Petra, which is one of those, which is that city, where Raiders of the Lost Ark, was filmed, isn't it?

Something like that. Although, Raiders of the Lost Ark, was not filmed then, it was filmed, more recently. And, so he, he caused a war, over this, particular divorce.

So, I haven't read up on it, it just says that it was a cause of war, whether, what happened with the war, I don't know. But you see how terribly complicated, this situation is. So there they are.

Herod, had given orders, to have John arrested, and had him put in prison. He did this, because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying, to Herod, it is not lawful, for you to have your brother's wife.

[13:54] The word lawful, meaning, not being derived from, the Greek for law, but meaning, it's not fitting, it's not appropriate, for you to have your brother's wife. In Jewish law, if the brother had died, and needed somebody, to carry on the line, then I think that would have been permissible, but to, for her to divorce the chap, while he's still alive, and then remarry, John says, this is, this is totally out of order.

Now, let's think about, Herod being a king. It says he's the king. Again, the commentaries, say that technically, he wasn't the king. He was the sort of local governor, but, he behaved like a king.

Well, I'm not sure that he behaved like a king. He behaved like the sort of king, he would like to behave like, and like to be called a king. So, Mark calls him a king.

And, you can see what a king is like, in Herod's estimation. A king is just somebody, who can send off, and have somebody arrested, because he tells you, that your marital life, is out of order.

Because, that's what happened, isn't it? John the Baptist, had been saying, you're way out of order. And, verse 17, Herod himself, had given orders, to have John arrested, and had him bound, and put in prison, because of this.

[15:15] That's an interesting way, for a king to behave. It makes you think, we have a lot to be grateful for, in the sort of order of society, that we have. That wouldn't, be allowed, would it?

The, the other members of parliament, the, judiciary, the press, would say, this is just not on. But, Herod didn't have any, of those constraints.

If he, didn't like what somebody said, he could have him arrested, and that's what he did. John had confronted him, saying, it's not fitting. Hence, John's arrest.

And, verse 19, NIV says, Herodias, nursed a grudge, against John. The Greek, just uses a word, for possession. It says, so, Herodias had something.

And, we would say, she had it in for, and it just fits the Greek, actually. So, Herodias, the woman, had it in for John. Can you, get the sense of that?

[16:18] You know, she's, schemed, and plotted, her way, to marry, this king. Nothing, has stood in her way. And, this, this, evangelical preacher, has the gall, to go public, and criticize her, and she has it in for him.

That's the situation. You get the feeling of it? Yeah. Now, she wanted to kill him. So, I don't think, I don't think she's a nice lady.

I don't think Herod married her, because of her gentle, tactful, feminine, skills, and grace.

I think she's a horrible woman. A little bit like, Jezebel, who married, Ahab, back in the Old Testament.

She, she was a, a scheming woman. She, do you remember that she, put her husband up, to incriminating, with the vineyard, Naboth.

[17:30] Am I right, you think I'm the right person? Yeah. And, you get the same sort of thing here, that the, this, horrible woman, is really the driving force, behind this, this, this turn of events.

She wanted to kill him, but she was not able to. And, please, savour, what is said about Herod. Herod, listen to it, he feared John.

He'd arrested him, but he feared John. And, he protected him, knowing him to be a righteous, and holy man.

And, Herod heard John. What should we do this afternoon? I don't know, the diary is a bit empty. Have we still got that John, down in the prison?

Yeah. Bring him up. Let him give me one of his sermons, because I really like to listen to what he has to say. He heard him, and he was greatly perplexed.

[18:39] I heard him yesterday. Do you know, I'm thinking about it. I can't come to a conclusion. He was greatly perplexed, but he liked to listen to him. And, what a situation, Herod is in.

Just think of those, that mixture of descriptions. He's taken action against him. He's had him arrested. But, he fears him.

The king, fears this preacher. He fears him. Presumably, he gets to his conscience. And, the king can't just brush it off, and say, you know, you don't have my education.

You certainly don't have my money. Don't take any notice of you. There's something about him, in which, Herod says, you know, he's just an ignorant peasant. But, he does say something that's true.

And, I can't get it out of my mind, that what he's saying is true. You know, he fears John. And, he respects him. He knows that he's righteous, and holy.

[19:44] And, I think, that's always a great thing, to say of somebody, isn't it? You know, he gets under my skin. My wife would like to have him killed. But, he's a, you know, I wish I could live like him.

He's a righteous man. And, he's a holy man. You know, he has a quality about him. And, even if you put him in prison, knock him about a bit, probably, I don't know what they did.

He's still a righteous man, and a holy man. And, you can't deny it. It's interesting, you know, that that's, the situation that Herod's in.

And, he's fascinated with him. He likes to hear. Give me that one again. You know, tell me that one about the Psalms. I like that sermon you have about the Psalms.

Tell me that. And, what about the Christ? That's an interesting one too. He's fascinated, by, this man, and what he has to say. And, he's perplexed.

[20:44] It's the same word as, we're, we're, what does it say? We're perplexed, but not, something, not, not cast down. I can't remember. Is it not in despair?

Yes. But, that's what he's, he's perplexed. Can't make up his mind. You know, I can't make up my mind about this chap.

Let me hear him again. You know, I can't, I can't make up my mind. And, he liked to listen to him. So, that's the situation, that's the situation, that Herod's in.

And, I want to say, that it's, it's, it's an interesting situation, isn't it? I don't know whether you can think of people, who, sort of, interested in Christian things.

Interested. I can think of, I used to go and visit, one of the shops around the corner. And, the proprietor there was always interested. He'd say, oh, come on, Phil, sit down now, what you got? [21 : 50] I've been, I've been looking in the Bible. Tell me what you've been finding. So, we'd have a conversation. And, and I'd say, you know, this is about faith in Jesus. Yeah, I know, I know, I know.

Now, it's interesting this bit about, it's interesting this bit about Babylon. He said, yeah, but it's off, slightly gone off topic, you see. He said, come back, we'll have another talk another time. Fascinated, interested, but, can't come to a conclusion. So, I don't know whether you can think of, of people in that situation. This is a situation that's Herod in. Herod's in. Let's move on. Now, please notice, verse 21. Finally, the opportune time came. The opportune time.

I thought I'd written on there what it was in Greek, but I don't think, was it the last slide? Ah, where did I put it? Where is it?

[22 : 54] Where is it? Oh, at the top. What a silly place to put it. Yeah. Eukairos. Eukairos means a particular season or time, and the eubit, the eubit, means good, as in a eulogy, is a good word.

And a Eucharist is, well, it's a thankfulness. So, this is the, eukairos, the, a good time, the opportune time.

And I wonder what Mark had in mind when he used that word. because it's opportune in many ways. It is a moment of, a moment, a special, significant moment.

It's a sort of turning point moment. And notice how Herod has gone on, I don't know, weeks, months, years, perplexed.

And now, the die will be cast. The opportune time came. Well, it's his birthday, but there's more going on than that.

[24 : 04] It's a day of spiritual decision, and in actual case, spiritual disaster. So, look at the, what happens, verse 21, on his birthday, Herod gave a banquet for the high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.

So, I don't know, I better not be too sarcastic about what sort of people they were, but they're put in terms of being, you know, the top dogs of Galilean society.

So, they probably all rolled up in their BMWs and 4x4s and stretch limos and all that sort of thing. So, it's a big occasion.

And, in verse 22, the daughter of Herodias, so this is, we presume, Herod's sort of stepdaughter. She comes in and she dances and pleases Herod and his dinner guests.

Now, some of it's left to the imagination. So, we're not told about the amount of wine that flowed, but I reckon, if you look at the way he answers and then when he wakes up, as it were, the following day, you know, when he reflects on it, when he's sober, how he, he wishes he hadn't done what he'd done.

[25 : 28] I think the wine flowed fairly freely and it doesn't tell you what sort of dance it was, but you can, given that Rome, this isn't sort of Jewish country dancing.

This is, this is, this is, I don't know, you, well, it's left to the imagination. It's not, it's not described. But, I mean, if you were to start thinking Bollywood and then work on from there, I think you'd be, you'd be in the right sort of territory.

So, she does this dance. How old was she? She's called a girl in verse 22. The previous time that word was used, girl, was in chapter 5, verse 42, which was the little girl who had died.

She got up and walked around in 542. She was 12 years old. So, we could be teenage. It's sort of used of, of young women up to the age they get married.

So, we sort of, I think we're probably thinking teenage. Perhaps, perhaps early 20s. We don't know. But she, she dances and pleases Herod and his dinner guests.

[26 : 48] And the king says to the girl, you can sort of imagine it, can't you? You can imagine. And they're all going, oh, fantastic. Well done. Oh, super. And, and so he sort of, that was so wonderful.

You ask for anything you want and we'll give it to you, my dear. And, and he repeats it. He promises her with an oath. Whatever you ask, I will give you up to half my kingdom.

You think that's very rash, isn't it? That's very, very rash. I think he's probably exaggerating, but it's a bit unwise to say something like that in public. And, I don't know, what is it?

It's showing off, isn't it? It's showing off his generosity. It's showing off how, I don't know, yeah, how generous he is, how, how he is, how, how with it he is with young people.

I don't know what he's, but it's just a rash, foolish thing to say. And, so she doesn't know the answer and she goes and asks mum. I think is, is interesting.

[27 : 53] I think mum has got her on her side. And, I think mum is scheming and involving daughter in it against her new husband or without, certainly without bringing him in on it.

So, mum, she goes out and asks mum. And, what a contrast there is between mum and dad.

Because Herod has been dithering for months and months about John the Baptist.

You know, shall I protect him? Shall I hear another sermon from him? What, what shall I do? You know, he's a good and right man. What, should I set him free? You know, he's been thinking, going round and round in that.

But mum, when she gets the opportunity, immediately, she says, daughter says, what shall I, what shall I ask for immediately? No hesitation.

Ask for his head chopped off on a plate. It's absolutely decisive, isn't it? Soon as the question's asked, give me the head of John the Baptist.

[28 : 58] And then, we now go into rapid motion. At once, the girl, with speed, went to the king with the request, I want you to give me, right now, the head of John the Baptist on a plate.

So, Herod has been wondering and dithering, but it's now too late because he has no, his options are suddenly closed down.

He's made a promise, everybody was watching him, they're all the leading people, he doesn't want to look stupid in front of them. And, you know, he realises he's been scuppered, he's been, now what's it, stitched up, hasn't he?

He's been stitched up. He's greatly distressed, because, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So, he's just got one option, which is straight away to send off, I'm afraid you're going to have to do this now, get me John the Baptist's head, bring it back, before dessert is served, you know, before the coffee comes, want it, you know, want it now, don't want to look stupid.

So, he sent an executioner, verse 27, no legal process, no appeal, no barristers, just, head. He immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head, the man went, beheaded John in the prison, brought back his head on a plate.

[30 : 32] He gave it to the girl, she gave it to her mother, job done, end of story. The quick answer, the immediate reply, the trap is closed. And it's a sorry tale, and Herod lived to regret it, didn't he?

So, when he heard about Jesus, it came back to him, I know who that is, that's the man I beheaded. Do you know how stupid I was? And I think the story is a vivid example of the danger of spiritual dithering.

Herod's indecision, that's just copied from the previous slide, he'd arrested him, but he feared him, protected him, he was fascinated with him, he was perplexed, and so on and so on, he dithered over John, meaning to say, really, he dithered over the gospel, because that was what John was telling him, he was telling him the message of faith, the message of God, the message of God's kingdom, and he didn't come to any conclusion, and he had the opportunity, which suddenly evaporated, the danger of dithering, the danger of being interested, but not convinced, now who was telling us about this, I don't know where I remember this, Benjamin Franklin, the American scientist, and was he, a politician as well, yeah, he went, sorry, is that correct, yes, okay, Lindsay says it's correct, so it must be correct, he was there, in the days of, the preacher, John Wesley, Whitefield, George Whitefield, and he heard George Whitefield, speaking, so George Whitefield, would have given a very clear, down the line, take it or leave it, sort of, put it in your pipe and smoke it, gospel message about Jesus Christ, and Benjamin Franklin, went along, he was, he was friends with, with George Whitefield, knew him socially, but what he noticed was, he counted the number of people, who could hear George Whitefield, because he was fascinated with how, how far his voice projected, and he did sums, you know, the distance, and the number of people, that were listening, and if you have, so many people per square foot, you know, all that sort of thing, here's somebody, who heard the gospel, but never, really, took on board, what it was saying, and I think of, the man in the, in the shop, round the corner, who was always interested, yeah, come sit down, what have you got in your Bible then, or something like that, but never came to faith, you might think of people, you might think of people, in our families, who have heard, time and again, but are always thinking, well one day,

I'll come to a conclusion on this, at the moment, you know, it's pretty evenly balanced, I'm fascinated by it, interested in a certain sort of way, but not prepared actually, to take it on its own

terms, and say yes, think about, the young people, who hear a lot, say well when I'm older, then I'll make a decision, or retired people, who say, well I'm, you know, I've got the years, years ahead of me, and I don't need to think about, morbid things like Christianity, but for every, person, there comes a point, at which, one way or another, no more options, no more chances, usually that will come, at the end of our lives, won't it, we've had the chances, all the way through, and there, there's no more chances, or it might come, that as we go, as we get older, we lose the capacity, to think, or to take something in, and all our family, will be praying for us, at that time, but the reality is, that the opportunity, was years earlier, and the door, has closed, closed, so this is, this is what this story, [35 : 18] I think is about, the dangers of dithering, and I want to say, to everybody here, if that's you, if you're saying, you know, I like to come to church, occasionally, like to think about it, fascinating really, interesting, these religious people, tell me a little bit more, you know, there's something, something special, about those people, and you, you analyze it, perhaps analyze it, from certain points of view, and you're sort of, perplexed, not quite sure, and just go on, being not quite sure, and go on, being not quite sure, and get used to, being not quite sure, and never actually, sort it out with God, it's a warning, isn't it, don't, let, the time go by, without, sorting things out, with God, don't just let it go on, well I like the singing, they're friendly people, spiritual,

I quite like that, have you sorted out, that you're a sinner, have you, have you said, have you got that bit right, have you understood, that what the whole point, of this is, that you need Jesus Christ, to die, to forgive your sins, have you got that bit straight, you're a sinner, have you got it straight, about what Jesus did, on the cross, that he died, for the forgiveness, of our sins, he took in himself, the wrath of God, that was due to us, that's what he was doing, no one else has done that, it can't be found, anywhere else, that's exactly, what you need, and you need, to connect with that, in a real way, have you got that bit, sorted out, have you got it, sorted out, that how you connect, is by taking, the promises of God, and believing them, like the song, that we sang, the vilest offender, who truly believes, that moment, from Jesus, a pardon receives, we got that bit clear, it's not about, being a nice person, it's not about, social skills, it's not about, about, living a good life, it's about, believing in Jesus Christ, have you got that, straight, have you got it, straight, that, human beings, are so incapable, of spiritual, progress, that they need, to be born again, that's what Jesus says, you are, you are so stuck, you need a complete, revolutionary, input from God, into your life, you need, you need, to be reborn, have you got that, bit straight, have you, asked God, have you said to God, that's me,

I need to be born again, I need this change, I need this faith, please do it for me, it's sort of, a prayer away, have you, have you, asked God, and prayed that, and got it sorted out, because here is the danger, of just dithering, of just being so near, and yet so far, and tolerating it, and going on like that, until, let's sing together, together.

Thank you.