

Mark 6:1-29 (PM)

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everybody. Good morning, good morning, good morning. It's lovely to see you. If you're new or newish and you haven't met me before, my name is Aaron. I'm one of the ministers on staff here. Mark chapter 6. We are just going to crack on. We're just going to get straight into it. So we have the first half of Mark chapter 6, and it's all about the mission, the first mission of the disciples. So they're heading out and they're returning, heading out and returning. But in the middle of this first mission, Mark inserts a story about the martyrdom of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod. Now remember, Mark is clever.

There's a reason he does this. And he does that to force us as hearers, as readers, as listeners, he forces us to consider the cost of discipleship. He's painting with a very vivid brush the fact that mission is hard. There's going to be problems. Even Jesus, we heard, was rejected in his hometown.

Now I want you to hold that thought. Again, most likely the big point of this first half of chapter 6 is something along the lines of discipleship is costly. However, Mark is usually very concise, and he tends to move his stories along quite quickly. But here, he gives a lot of attention to this character, Herod. Mark obviously has something for us here. So I want to focus in on just that little story there. This one guy, Herod. Because I think Mark has a reason for giving him so much real estate in what is normally a very concise narrative. So we're going to be looking at verses 14 to 29. And I do want to say it is a coincidence that this sort of very grisly story falls on Halloween, all right, as a complete coincidence. Let's begin by orienting ourselves here. So Herod was the ruler in Judea. And this Herod here in chapter 6 is the son of the Herod who wanted to kill Jesus as a child, which we read about in Matthew 2. So Herod was part of a family sort of political dynasty that led in this part of the world for a while, sort of like the Trudeaus or the Kennedys or the Bushes perhaps. And Herod led a very privileged life. His world was all about power.

He had lots of it. He could indulge himself. He could do whatever he wanted. For example, whilst on holiday, he liked the look of his brother's wife. And so he got rid of his own wife and took her. Herod, her name was Herodias. And this is going to be confusing here. But Herodias was also Herod's niece, which meant that she was previously married to Herod's brother. So her first two marriages were to her uncles. And to complicate furthermore, Herodias to her first husband had a daughter called Salome who went on to marry Herod's half-brother. Right. So don't try and wrap your head around that family tree because it's more like a hedge where the branches only, they only go out so far and then they sort of pop back in again. So this weird and powerful and violent family.

[3 : 5 2] And Herod rules over them. But despite the weirdness of this family arrangement, this sort of incestuous and adulterous arrangement here, I mean, no one would be crazy enough to say anything to him about it, of course, except for John, John the Baptist. He was not the kind of guy who would read the polls before speaking. So we see here in verse 18, he says to Herod, it's not lawful what you've done.

This is wrong what you have done. It's wrong to have your brother's wife. John had the guts to say, what you did was wrong. And it was a very brave thing to do. And it was a very costly thing for him to do. Now the wife, Herodias, she doesn't seem to think of herself as much of a victim in all of this. She doesn't like what John's saying. Seems she rather enjoyed being married to a king.

So she wanted John silenced permanently. This is verse 19. It's very clear. Herodias had a grudge against him, wanted to put him to death. So to somewhat placate her, Herod just imprisoned John. But why didn't he kill him? Well, because Herod was fascinated by John. And this is where it gets very interesting. Look at verse 20. Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, yet heard him gladly. So interesting. Isn't this bizarre? It seems that Herod would sneak down to the dungeons and listen to

John preach. And he loved the preaching. But he was perplexed by it. And this word here literally means he was divided. Now, divided. It's a great word. I think we can safely guess why John was divided. On the one hand, he's listening to God's word being preached. John's calling him to repent, telling him that God has a Messiah who's coming and the world won't be the same. John's telling him to repent, seek forgiveness. What a wonderful thing to hear, forgiveness. John's calling him to live in

God's world in God's way. It's all fantastic stuff. Herod would have felt his conscience tugged. Perhaps he began to imagine another way of living. But on the other hand, he's thinking, I've got a really great life. I can do whatever I want. I mean, why would he want to mess that up?

[6 : 29] So he's got these two things happening inside of him. He's a divided man. He's got the gospel pulling him in one direction and his desire to maintain power pulling him in the other. And it would appear that that was just the state of play for a long time because he just kept going down and listening to John. And at the risk of using a cliché, Herod stood at these crossroads.

He had an opportunity to change his life, to follow John's call, but he just didn't. He literally, it's like he's in a car and he puts on the emergency brake. He just stalls there. Just stays at the crossroads, not making a decision until a decision was made for him.

Let's just pause here for a moment and ask the question, why does John, sorry, why does Mark slow down the narrative here and tell us all of this? Why tell us about Herod? As I said at the start, it's got something to do with this idea of mission.

Mission is hard and powerful people can oppress gospel messengers, but there's more going on here. And I think it's this. I think we hear about Herod's predicament because it's a common one. Here's a guy who lived how he pleased. He liked power. He liked sex. He liked pleasure. His worldview was, you know, I want to maximize these things in my life.

[8 : 02] I want to keep just doing whatever I want. But along comes John the Baptist who seems to be happily living for something else. John's life was given over to a greater purpose, a higher purpose, and I don't think Herod could wrap his head around it.

And as such, his own worldview was completely rocked. The Word of God came into Herod's life and it shook his foundations. And he wanted to hear more because he knew there was truth there. But he was so conflicted. So he lives in this really weird space of hearing God's Word, but spinning his wheels, if you know that saying.

He's just kind of spinning his wheels when it comes to acting on it. Now what does that mean for us? I just think we can do this. The Word of God can come into our life.

You know, sometimes you hear sermons or you'll read something in the Bible and it shakes you up. Like Herod, your worldview, you hear it and you have a lot of difficulty incorporating it into your brain.

[9 : 15] Perhaps it's a word about sin that hits particularly hard for you. Perhaps it's something about sexuality or money or whatever. But it comes to you and you can't quite work out how that could fit into your chosen lifestyle right now.

It doesn't slot in. It doesn't go in easily. And it sort of bumps up hard against some more culturally assembled values that you have.

What do we do when that happens? Well, here we have this cautionary tale of Herod. So I'll say it simply. Don't do what Herod did. Don't wait to act on God's Word because, you know, Herod had the chance to change his life, but he's stalled at just processing.

Just processing, processing, processing. He had the chance to change his life, but eventually that choice was taken from him by Herodias.

And as a result, something changed in Herod's life. Something changed in his heart. And I'll tell you why we know this. See, what we're doing, what we're reading right now is something that happened very, very early in the ministry of Jesus.

[10 : 33] But let me remind you of something that happened very late in the ministry of Jesus. When Herod finally meets the Jesus that John told him about later in the Gospels in Luke 23, Jesus has been arrested.

You know the story. He's been arrested and he's brought before the authorities and he's brought before Herod. I'll read this little section to you. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad for he had long desired to see him because he'd heard about him.

He was hoping to see him do some sort of sign. Kind of got this curiosity about it. So he questioned him at great length, but Jesus made no answer.

Between the death of John the Baptist and the arrest of Jesus, Herod's heart had become stone. And Jesus saw his heart and wouldn't even speak to him. It's very chilling. Folks, when God speaks to us, we move on it. If God has spoken to you, like John spoke to Herod, don't waver.

[11:49] Don't spin your wheels. Don't put off action. Move on it. Because it seems at some point if we keep pushing God away, in areas of our life we keep pushing God away, it seems like the cautionary tale here suggests that our hearts can become rigid and incapable of responding as they should.

Something changed in Herod. It's probably got something to do with this stupid, drunken promise he made. So let's have a quick look at that.

So in verse 21 now, we have this scene. You know, remember, Herod's the head estate. He has to keep people happy, throw big parties. So it's his birthday.

He throws a big party, invites all the important people. And it's a very indulgent affair. He gets his wife's daughter, who's his niece. Oh, hang on. What is she? Anyway, yeah, whatever she is.

You know, to dance for his friends. And do you know the scene in *Pride and Prejudice* where people are all dancing in the movie? It's not that. It's not that.

[12:58] It's not a tap dance. The Greek indicates it's a bit of a saucy dance. Herod is probably a bit drunk at this point. He loves this.

He loves the dance. He wants to reward Salome. And in a show of power and stupidity, he says to her, I'll give you whatever you want.

And all his mates are slapping him on the back. And you're the man, Herod. You know, but it all goes a bit sideways. Because Herodias sees a chance. She seizes her chance and she gets her daughter to ask for John's head on a platter.

And it's so tragically ironic, isn't it? Compared to Herod, she is so decisive. Now, Herod has a decision to make.

Despite his love for John's teaching, his heart is captivated by power. I mean, his great fear is, you know, losing face in front of powerful people. So he acts against his conscience and murders an innocent man.

[14:00] And again, the whole thing is such a tragedy. Herod liked this preacher. But he really liked popularity. And he really liked power. And he really liked pleasure. Folks, there are many people who reject Jesus on this basis.

But there are many Christians who reject aspects of Christ's teaching on this basis as well. We refuse to act on God's word because we love power. We love sex. We love popularity.

So what do we do? What do you do when you feel like this? What do you do when you have Herod's choice before you? When you feel the pull to be Christ's ambassador at your school, at your work, in your neighborhood, but you really like being popular as well and you don't want to be uncontroversial.

Folks, what do you do? Well, I think there's lots of things you can do. But can I just suggest one thing to you? Just one thing. Perhaps you can remember these numbers. 1, 3, 9. Psalm 139.

We pray for ourselves. We pray this psalm for folks who have barriers to following Jesus. Psalm 139, just one verse, 23.

[15:13] Search me, O God. Know my heart. Try me. Know my thoughts. And see if there's any grievous way in me.

And lead me to the way everlasting. We bring our divided hearts to God. That's what we do. That's certainly one thing you can do. Let me attempt a summary here.

Do you know, I've heard that, I read this a few years ago, that Tolkien, who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, when he would re-read his book, there was only one place that would bring him to tears.

And it's the scene where Sam and Frodo are sleeping and Gollum is about to lead them into the giant spider's lair. You probably know this scene. And right before that, something happens to Gollum.

And he looks at Frodo, who's been really, really kind to him. And his heart starts to soften. And he starts to think, I can't do this. And he looks at Frodo, who's sleeping, and he reaches out and he touches his hand.

[16:15] This really tender moment. But at that point, unfortunately, Sam wakes up and says, what are you doing? Get away from him. And Gollum uses that as an excuse to return to his original plan. Apparently, it's the only part of the book that Tolkien tears up at. Because it's such a tragic moment. You have this creature who's got this such awfully divided heart. And he has two paths before him. And something happens. And he chooses the wrong path. And as a result, his heart, his heart becomes harder. Friends, perhaps your heart is divided this morning. Divide it when it comes to mission. Divide it when it comes to giving. Divide it when it comes to some sin in your life. Perhaps you're playing games with sin. Here it shows us, folks. And this is very important. We can't keep pushing God away in areas of our life with no effect. We can't think that has no effect on us.

[17:18] We can't push God away continually in areas of our life and say, I can keep doing that without consequence. It's foolish. It's naive. We can't think that we can suppress our conscious for a time and just believe that it will awaken later.

It's naive to think that. Don't live like this. Here it shows us. Sometimes we run out of time. And sometimes those decisions, we keep making them, our hearts become so seared. You know, like a steak. You sear it both sides to seal in the stuff. It becomes so seared that the hardness becomes locked in. Folks, I know what you're thinking. This is really heavy. Aaron, I liked your other sermons better. I know. I like those ones better too. But look, folks, it just seems to me the story of here and here is a warning. It's a story about the death of a conscience. A conscience that was stirred for a while. That even started to come alive perhaps. But then died. When he failed to act on God's word.

[18:33] When he failed to act courageously. When he feared what others would think of him. And I, you know, like I know, I think primarily this message is for non-believers. But not solely.

It's also for us believers. If we neglect acting on God's word, we can become progressively desensitized to him. And when that happens, I mean, we're still saved.

But folks, the joys of the gospel, they can fade. You know, Jesus offers us his forgiveness and his friendship and his guidance.

And he gives us a mission in the world. These are such great treasures. And perhaps they don't shine as much as they did in our hearts. So when God knocks on your door, when the word of God speaks to your heart, folks, don't spin your wheels.

Don't live with a divided heart. When God speaks, act on it. When it comes to mission, act on it. The conviction of sin, act on it.

[19:41] Forgiveness, believe it. Amen. Amen.