

## 2024.7.14. The danger of rash promises

The scene in Herod's banquet hall is vividly described in Mark 6 as a play enacted by a cast of all too believable characters. Each of them came to the banquet with their own entirely different world views, and each responded to the unfolding drama according to their own pre-determined opinions.

**King Herod** held his throne only as a puppet of the Romans. He had no real independent power, but was proud and arrogant, so liked to pretend that he had. In defiance of the law, he married his brother Philip's wife Herodias, and gave lavish banquets to impress his court. He realised he was in the wrong, which gave him a guilty conscience, but he also liked to talk to John the Baptist privately about theological matters. "When he heard John, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him."

**John the Baptist** was widely recognised as a righteous and holy man. John's fearless criticism of Herod's illegal marriage angered Herodias and embarrassed Herod, who was forced to silence him. Herod was obliged to "send men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias".

**Herodias** realised she was in a vulnerable position, and was acutely threatened by John's criticism. Mark sums up her attitude in a couple of pithy sentences: "Herodias had a grudge against him [John], and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John...and he protected him".

**Herod's daughter** danced at the banquet well enough to please Herod and his guests. She perhaps had the same ambitious attitude as her mother, developing a way to use her feminine charms to get what she wanted from the King. She induced him to say, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it....even half of my kingdom." So she asked her mother for advice, and Herodias saw her chance to trap Herod into granting her revenge on John. She told the girl to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

The "courtiers and officers and the leaders of Galilee" were unwilling witnesses to Herod's rash promise. When Herod saw that he had been caught out, he was "deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her".

So John died, a martyr to a vindictive woman and a foolish king.