

Sunday Homily

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

11 JULY 2021

YEAR B

“Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man...
When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed.”

Mark 6:20

Illustration

Imagine you are in the supermarket, doing your weekly shop on a busy Saturday morning. As you reach second place in the queue, the unremarkable person in front of you starts ripping the packaging off all the things in their trolley and throwing it in a heap on the floor. As they begin loading their undressed purchases onto the conveyor belt, they also start to proclaim loudly the dreadful wastefulness of our society. “All these plastic containers are made with oil we cannot spare; they will pollute the ground for centuries; and all this time God’s precious children are lost and starving. I want the food, but not the packaging; you are killing our planet and all you care about is making money, no matter who gets hurt.”

It’s not just embarrassing and disruptive; it makes you uncomfortable. Your trolley suddenly seems full of packaging, too. You look anxiously for another checkout; you try to stand apart from the rumpus. Then the manager appears, and the security staff; they manhandle the miscreant out of the way and try to clear up the mess.

Gospel Teaching

Herod may have had similar feelings about John the Baptist. He was torn between the position of the supermarket manager and the discomfited fellow-shopper. In a position of authority he could not allow John to damage his reputation. He has vested interests in the way that things are, whether he thinks John is right or not. Then again, despite his sneaking suspicion that John may have God on his side, he realises that his own behaviour cannot escape John’s criticism. He personally has too much to lose from sparing the Baptist. He has the power to silence John’s protests and lets himself be forced into doing so by someone who is more resentful and less scrupulous.

Mark, by careful ordering of his material, hints that the same fate awaits Jesus, who has still greater authority than John, the prophet who has prepared his way. The people are too stubborn and self-willed to listen to the voice of God. They are too preoccupied with worldly matters and self-interest to repent. Changing their mind about past and present behaviour would be humiliating – there is simply too much to lose. So the uncomfortable disturbances must be silenced.

Application

The prophets who revealed God's insight into contemporary behaviour were members of a long tradition in ancient Israel. They were rarely welcomed, not only because their behaviour was often bizarre, but because people did not want to hear the truth. Yet with the benefit of hindsight their message was better understood, their divine inspiration perceived and their words respected.

As Christians we are called both to heed the voice of the prophets and to be like them – speaking out for God. It is not a prospect we relish because it may make us stand out in ways we will find uncomfortable. Influenced by our liberal, rights-orientated times, perhaps we are more prepared to tolerate what is clearly unacceptable. But, like the uncomfortable shopper, we sometimes recognise underlying issues and know we should not remain silent.

Yet we are not alone in our calling: being a Christian is not so much about lone voices crying in the wilderness, as being a God-centred community. We can choose to live according to different values from the rest of the world. To do this we must be self-aware and honest about our own behaviour. We must pray: always seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit when faced with moral dilemmas. We must use well the rich resources of scripture, tradition and reason. We must think carefully about the issues which face humanity and we must do our best to agree on ways to respond. We should be prepared to change our minds and our behaviour, and not afraid of ridicule or criticism.

It seems far simpler to keep well away from people who make a scene, however much we secretly admire their motives. Yet apathy and inaction may have been just as crucial in bringing John and Jesus to their deaths as aggression and fear. If we do not have the "gift of prophecy" ourselves – the insight and ability to communicate – perhaps, as Christ's body on earth, we should associate ourselves with those who do. For only with our active participation can the kingdom of God be realised.