

### ***It's Complicated***

In the name of him through whose blood we have redemption and the forgiveness of sin, dear friends in Christ: I'm sure you've heard and most likely used the expression "it's complicated." People say it when asked a question about something for which there is no short answer. It's a phrase that goes a long way to describe today's Gospel reading because, well, it's complicated.

It's also very unusual for a text from the Gospel of St. Mark. He tends to keep the action moving forward and the focus almost entirely on Jesus. But what we have here is a flashback to something that happened earlier. And while Jesus is mentioned in the passage, he's pretty much in the background. The focus of this account is Herod; Herod Antipas, to be precise; a man whose life can best be described as complicated.

Allow me to explain. First, it's complicated for us because he's one of at least six guys named Herod that show up in the New Testament. Keeping them straight can be a little tricky; but we're going to try. Herod Antipas was a son of Herod the Great. You remember him. He's the guy who was the king of the Jews when Jesus was born – and who tried to kill the Christ child by ordering the death of the babes of Bethlehem. He was an ambitious, ruthless, and in his later years a very paranoid man. He put himself forward when the Romans, who had conquered Palestine, were looking for a local nobleman to rule as their proxy over the often troublesome Jews and other peoples of the region. In this way Herod the Great became the king of the Jews; which is ironic because he wasn't from a particularly noble family nor was he a Jew. No matter: he fooled the Romans and got the job. And since he was the king of the Jews, he tried (for appearances sake at least) to live like one. Anyway, this Herod the Great had several wives and many sons, some of whom he had executed for fear that they were plotting against him to take his throne.

Upon his death, his kingdom was divided into four portions that were ruled by four of his surviving sons. Herod Antipas, the guy we're looking at today, inherited Galilee in the north and Perea, a narrow strip of land that ran along the east side of the River Jordan. What's interesting is that Mark in today's text consistently calls him a king; but that wasn't his real title. Because the kingdom had been divided into four, he was actually given the lesser title "Tetrarch", that is, ruler of a fourth. Ah, but Herod Antipas liked to think of himself as a king. When no Romans were around to hear, that's how he referred to himself. And his lifelong goal was to edge his half-brothers out of their shares and reunite his father's kingdom under himself.

One of the steps he took toward achieving that goal was to arrange a politically advantageous marriage between himself and the daughter of King Aretus, who ruled over the very wealthy neighboring nation of Nabatea. He did this to raise himself in the eyes of the Romans whose approval he needed to make his dream come true. Unfortunately for him, however, he was a man who let other passions interfere with his ambitions. It happened that when visiting a half-brother named Philipp, one of Herod the Great's sons who did not inherit a portion of the kingdom, Herod Antipas met and fell in love with Philipp's wife Herodias. She had the advantage of being markedly younger and prettier than Herod's current wife. Herodias was, in turn, the daughter of yet another of Herod's half-brothers – one of those whom had been executed on suspicion of plotting against their father. So this Herodias whom Herod fell in love with was both his niece and his sister-in-law. I did say was complicated.

Okay, so Herodias very much shared the ambitions of Herod Antipas. And she knew she had a better chance of reaching her goals united with him rather than her landless, title-less husband, Philipp. But she also let Herod Antipas know that she wasn't about to play second fiddle to his present wife, the princess from Nabatea. "I'm not going to be your mistress or a plural wife. You send her packing. Divorce her and send'r home to daddy." This put Herod in a bind. He needed the noble clout the princess gave him. And to divorce her might start a war with King Aretus, who would see the move as an insult to him and his kingdom. You can almost see Herod telling Herodias, "Darling I love you, and I want to be with you; but, you see, it's complicated." Sin always is. And it always makes it more so.

Well, the plot thickens: Herod's wife, the princess from Nabatea, had the foresight to plant and keep spies around her husband. They informed her of his having fallen for Herodias and the plans the two were hatching together. She realized that one way Herod could solve at least part of his dilemma was to arrange for her to have an unfortunate fatal accident. She decided to run home to her father, King Aretus, before she encountered such a mishap. Herod promptly divorced her and married Herodias.

That didn't exactly solve Herod's problems. In fact, it created several more. He did have to fight a war with Aretus. It ended up being a costly affair that embarrassed Herod rather badly. Beyond that, there was trouble on the home front. You see, Herod always tried to present himself to his subjects as an honest and moral man. He also presented himself as a follower of the Jewish religion. And to some degree he was. And God's Word has a thing or two to say about divorce and remarriage. None of it's good. But especially prohibited is marrying your living brother's wife. The whole thing was a national scandal; but few people had the courage to speak out about it – publicly at least. Not so John the Baptizer. John fearlessly called all people to repent. He railed against everyone's sins, including Herod's. And John was very popular. Folks from all over were swarming out to the desert to hear him.

As we heard, Herod respected John. He knew him to be a genuine man of God. He admired his boldness. Deep down he knew the fiery preacher was right about denouncing him for his sin. But Herod didn't like the bad name John was giving him before the public. Even worse was the pressure he was getting from Herodias who wanted John silenced permanently. As they say, "Hell knows no fury ...". For all his faults, though, Herod did have a conscience. He didn't want to add murder to his list of crimes – especially the murder of one of God's prophets. So, in order to take away John's audience and keep him safe from an assassin sent by his vengeful new wife, Herod had John locked up in his dungeon. Doubtless he hoped the discomfort John experienced there would get him to hold his tongue. At regular intervals he'd pull John up out of the dungeon to hear what he had to say. But John never changed his tune or held back. Each time he'd give Herod both barrels of God's Law. This, in turn, troubled Herod greatly. John's words stung him. He knew he was guilty and that he should repent. But he didn't want to give up the lovely Herodias and the plans they were making together. Again, you can see him telling John, "I know you're right, but, it's complicated."

It wasn't so complicated for Herodias. She feared that if Herod kept listening to John, eventually he might win her husband over. Then she'd be out. And *that* she could not allow to happen. So she waited for the right time to play her ace in the hold. She knew that her husband was a slave to his passions – that he'd make unwise and immoral decisions when tempted by feminine youth and beauty; after all, that's how she'd won him over. All she had to do was to present him with someone younger and prettier than herself; then he'd be like putty in her hands. And she had that: her daughter, Salome.

The perfect opportunity arose when Herod decided to throw himself a grand birthday party. It needs to be said that this was a very un-Jewish thing to do. As a rule, the Jews did not celebrate birthdays. It was more of a Greek and Roman thing. But even then, it's kind of tacky to throw a party in your own honor. It's one thing if others do it for you; quite another if you do it for yourself. But that's what Herod was about: self promotion. He invites all the best people to his banquet: the nobles and aristocrats, the powerful courtiers, the high ranking military officers. He wants them to understand, "If I move up, you all move up with me."

Herodias waits for just the right moment to spring her trap. She wants the guests' bellies sated with rich food and their minds muddled with wine. Then she sends in her daughter. She's to be part of the entertainment, which would have been a surprise for Herod. It was thought of as degrading for someone of noble birth to perform like this. Even more surprising was the way she danced. Mind you, this was no dance recital tap tap here, tap tap there, spin around ta-da. No, this dance was designed to be ... shall we say stimulating? The goal was to arouse warm feelings and dark passions – which is creepy because this girl is Herod's niece through his half-brother, and his great niece and step-daughter through Herodias. Yes, it's complicated. And really creepy.

But it produced the desired result. In his wine sodden and lustfully excited state, he promises the girl anything her heart desires. As she was coached to do, she immediately retreats to ask her mother what it is she's to demand. "What were his exact words?" Herodias wants to know. She is delighted when she finds out. But she has to move swiftly. They've got to ask now while Herod is still at the banquet in front of all those who heard the oath he took.

Herod is made extremely sorrowful when he hears the girl's request for the head of John the Baptizer. He'd like to take back his words; but it's too late. And he can't afford to break his oath before all these people. He needs for them to think of him as a man of his word. So, regretfully he gives the order. He must realize too that he's been played by Herodias – that she was behind this from the very start. That certainly had to complicate things with their relationship.

But then, Herod was a complicated guy. He calls himself a king. He likes to think that he's in charge. But the truth is that he is ruled by others. He's ruled by his unlawful wife. He's ruled by public opinion. He's ruled by the Romans. And he's ruled by his own lusts and passions. He wants to be thought of as a good and righteous man. He wants to uphold his honor. But he's betrayed his first wife. He's betrayed his brother whose wife he stole away. And now he's betrayed and murdered a truly righteous man whose only crime was faithfully to speak God's Word and call him to repent.

And now Herod is a man with a deeply guilty conscience. Herodias thought she succeeded in silencing God's Word, but John's call to repent still echoes in her husband's ears. And when he hears about Jesus, how he's performing miracles and going about preaching that all people should repent, his guilty conscience leads him to the fantastic conclusion that John has been raised from the dead – and likely, that he's coming to get me. Add fear to the things that rule over Herod's heart. It's a terrible and terribly complicated way to live.

And what I'd have you see is that Herod is a portrait of the sin nature in all of us. We've all got a Herod inside. We like to think that we are the masters of our own destinies, that we are in control of our lives; but the truth is that we are controlled by other things: people's opinions, our need to appear to be honorable even when we're not, our sinful lusts and desires, and our

fears. And we complicate our lives with sin – always having to cover our tracks and remember what lies we’ve told and to whom with the goal of convincing ourselves and others that we’re better and more honorable than we really are. We’ve got a Herodias inside us too – a part of us that wants to silence God’s Word so we can do whatever we like without guilt or fear. But even when she succeeds in the short term, she ultimately fails; for God’s Word will not be silent. And he always gets the last Word, whether we choose to listen or not.

Sadly, Herod chose not to listen to God’s call to repent. He appears later at the trial of Jesus, when Pontius Pilate tried to pass the buck and let Herod try the sticky case. At the time, Jesus condemned Herod by refusing to speak to him. What more was there to say to a man who knew what was right and yet refused to repent? There was quite a bit of irony in that confrontation: the man who called himself the King of the Jews face to face with the true King. The guilty man who liked to think of himself as righteous sitting in judgment of the one who truly is righteous. Herod with Jesus: the man he had once thought was John raised from the dead who truly would rise from the dead.

Herod never gave up his ambitions. He shows up briefly in the book of Acts when he orders the arrest and execution of James, the first of the Apostles to be martyred. When he saw how that pleased the Jewish enemies of the early Christian Church and how that raised him in the eyes of his adoring public, he arrested Peter also. He would have killed him too, but the Lord sent an angel to rescue Peter from prison.

In AD 39 through all their conniving and scheming Herod and Herodias thought they had their ducks all lined up to achieve their dream. They traveled to Rome expecting the Emperor to give Herod the crown and title he spent his life so shamelessly pursuing. Things didn’t turn out as they hoped though. They were betrayed by Herod’s nephew, Herod Agrippa I, who happened to be the brother of Herodias. He accused the pair of treason. So instead of inheriting a kingdom, the couple was exiled to Gaul and never heard of again. It bears mentioning that in the end a similar but far more frightful fate awaits all who refuse to repent: they’ll not inherit a kingdom and they’ll be exiled from the grace of God forever. But in the short term for Herod and Herodias, I guess they found out that in politics it’s a lot more complicated than you think.

Our lives don’t need to be so complicated. What needlessly complicates them are our many sins: the Herod and Herodias within that want to appear good even though they’re not, who pretend to be in charge but are in fact ruled by other things. It’s so much simpler to live in God’s truth; so much simpler to hear the Lord’s call to repent, to admit our guilt, to turn from sin, and to receive Christ’s blood purchased forgiveness; so much simpler to stop striving to achieve a kingdom and inherit the one Jesus gives to us by his grace. So, let me ask, what sins are complicating your life? Now is the time to simplify. Now is always the right time to simplify. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***