

SERMON: Sunday – 11 July 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Grace and Truth

(Ephesians 1:3-14 and Mark 6:14-29)

I had the privilege of conducting a wedding yesterday at Kirknewton Stables. The couple were Grace and Sam. But today I want to talk about Grace and Truth.

And I don't want to dwell on the beheading of John the Baptist. In many ways that barbaric story is in the Gospel to illustrate the barbaric world in which Jesus came to transform and liberate.

The emphasis of the story on Mark is right at the beginning of the passage in those first few words of verse 14.

“King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known”

And some were thinking that this was John the Baptist having been raised from the dead.

That's what Herod believed. And we're left to wonder, 'is Herod feeling ashamed of what he had done, in having John beheaded?

Sin has its consequence. You can't sin and escape the effects of guilt and shame.

It seems to me that Herod was indeed ashamed, and rightly so, though by all accounts he was a harsh, ruthless, power hungry, greedy narcissist.

Verse 20 tells us that Herod actually “feared John and protected him”. He liked to listen to John.

Of course there's one thing listening and there's another thing actually doing something about what you hear.

Herod, it seemed, like to listen to John, was disturbed by what he heard, but stubbornly refused to change his ways.

Even in verse 26 we read that Herod was “greatly distressed” (NIV) or “deeply regretted” (NLT) agreeing to his wife's request to have John killed in order to satisfy a grudge she'd been nursing against John for calling out her adulterous marriage to Herod.

Herod couldn't face losing face in the face of his invited guests and so agreed to John's beheading.

And maybe this is why this story is here in the good news - to show what happens when the kingdom of God is rejected and the kingdom of Herod is chosen.

It serves as a warning, that when the kingdoms of this world are preferred to the kingdom of God, then the result is barbarism, strife, wealth inequality, poverty, slavery, human trafficking etc etc.

So where is the good news?

It's there all the time. Hidden. A mystery. Like yeast in a batch of dough. Or Salt in water. You can't see it but you know its there once you've tasted it.

That's why, the kingdom is all about enabling people to taste and see that the Lord is good.

The goodness of Christ is there in every situation and in every life, waiting to be discovered.

Unbelievers may be offended by that but just because you haven't tasted it, doesn't mean it's not there.

And the good news is there in the story of Herod's barbarism, in that there is another kingdom emerging which will in the end replace all other kingdoms.

Jesus is on the move. Herod had heard about him. The kingdom of heaven was at hand and set to overcome the kingdom of Herod.

The way of love is going to triumph over the way of jealousy, abuse of power and vengeance.

And here we are, 2,000 years later, in a world perhaps not as barbaric yet still longing for more kingdom of heaven than kingdom of Herod.

It wasn't that long after Jesus that the early Christians began to understand what Jesus' life had been all about. The Spirit helped them to see the kingdom of heaven Jesus spoke about and brought into being.

Paul, writing to the Ephesians, gives them and us, lots of reasons to rejoice, and be thankful. In fact, if you meditate on these verses which Colin read, each one could be a sermon in its own right. Each one is worth taking lots of time over.

Each one is a truth that can be applied to each of our lives.

Listen to them:

- 3 We are blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing.
- 4 ... loved and chosen in Christ to be holy and blameless.
- 5 ... destined for adoption by God through Jesus Christ.
- 6 ... living to the praise of his glory
- 7 ... redeemed and freely forgiven through grace
- 8... showered with God's kindness, wisdom and understanding
- 9 The mystery of Christ is revealed to us
- 10 ... included in the gathering together of all things in Christ
- 11 ... have received a wonderful inheritance in Christ
- 12 ... setting our hope on Christ
- 13 ... marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit
(Ephesians 1).

These are the truths and the blessings that are illustrative of the kingdom of heaven and of what God in Christ has done for us and is doing through us.

It's all about the free gift of grace. Herod didn't get it because the kingdoms of the world don't get the concept of grace. The nearest the world gets is in asserting an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours; and that's not grace.

For the law was given through Moses; (but) grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

May we ever live in that grace and truth.