

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING FAITHFUL IN A WORLD FULL OF INJUSTICE
Matthew 14:1-13a, Malachi 4

For All Nations Presbyterian Church, 7 February 2021

Introduction: principles vs popularity

- Popularity seems to be the main way that people decide whether something is right or not.
 - We love opinion polls to gauge what people think on issues.
 - And it's not only ordinary people; politicians love opinion polls.
 - They want to know what most people think about an issue.
 - That will then determine what they think and will stand for.
 - After all, if you want to be elected, you want to stand for popular things!
 - So, in recent times, we have seen all kinds of polls on what people think of our Premier, and what they think of our border situation.
 - In the past, there have been opinion polls about daylight saving, euthanasia, and about same-sex marriage.
 - If you don't want to be out of touch, on the wrong side of history, you need to pay attention to what most people are thinking.
- A classic example of this is fashion.
 - Some of you might care about fashion more than others and keep up the trends, but all of us are influenced by it to some degree.
 - In the 1970s, everyone wore a lot of brown, ladies had big hair, and flares were ordinary pants to wear (slide).
 - When I was in high school, haircuts like flattops and undercuts were common (slide).
 - You don't see those things anymore. Maybe you are glad about that!
 - No-one likes to be the one who stands out because what they are wearing is clearly out of touch with the majority.
 - That would make us feel self-conscious, sad, and pressured.
- Christians in our city are somewhat like that person who wears 1970s clothes or 1990s hairstyles in the modern world.
 - Let's be honest; many see us as more out of date than this; perhaps something like this next slide.
 - We hold to all kinds of things that we are convinced are true but are way out of step with what most people believe.
 - We hold to sex being limited to marriage; we hold to radical generosity; we hold to discipling our children; and we believe in the critical importance of Jesus.
 - That makes us unpopular. Our principles don't line up with the opinion polls.
 - In truth, they never really have through history.
 - I pray that this somewhat confronting passage today will help us accept that it is a good thing to hold to godly principles, even when this leads to bad outcomes.
 - There is still a place for being faithful to God when others disagree.

Context and structure

- When we are in the gospels, it is tempting to just look at each episode in isolation.
 - Especially the kind of passage we have here today.
 - After all, it is the start of a chapter, and the publisher has added a heading above v1.

- Surely this is something completely new.
 - Well, yes, and no.
 - Matthew has carefully arranged his material for a reason, and here we see that the previous passage and this one go together.
 - The passage before this one was when Jesus was rejected in Nazareth, where he grew up.
 - We looked at this last week.
 - This passage initially looks quite different; Herod is the leading player here, and Jesus is barely mentioned.
 - But they are together for a reason.
 - They both show people rejecting the truth.
 - The people of Nazareth rejected Jesus; Herod and his wife rejected John the Baptist when he spoke truth into their lives.
 - Matthew is showing us that not everyone will respond to the gospel.
 - Many will reject it, for various reasons; and some of that rejection will be violent.
- When it comes to the structure in this passage, there is something different here.
 - It seems that every modern book and TV show uses flashbacks nowadays.
 - You will have seen this: the director shows you some character or scene you don't fully understand, then they flashback to the past so you understand what is happening.
 - That is what Matthew does here.
 - v1-2 detail the present-day, live action.
 - Then from v3, following the word "for", Matthew explains why Herod thinks this way.
 - He flashes back some months to what happened between Herod and John the Baptist; v3-13 all happened at an earlier time.

TRANSITION Most of Matthew's gospel focusses on Jesus as the main person in each episode. Not this one. The leading player here is Herod, who leads us to our first point:

1. The world is full of crazy ideas about Jesus (v1-2)

- Look at v1 with me.
 - Before we go further, we need to know who this person is that is being talked about.
 - He is called Herod the tetrarch.
 - If you are learning English, I apologise, the word tetrarch is not a common English word, and I think most people in this room would struggle to define it!
 - We see the name 'Herod', and our minds quickly go to the Herod who the wise men spoke to at the birth of Jesus.
 - While it is the same name, it is not the same person.
 - The Herod in this passage is Herod Antipas, who was one of the sons of Herod the Great, the one the wise men spoke to.
 - Herod Antipas was a tetrarch (slide).
 - This means he was a ruler of a quarter of his father's kingdom; tetra meaning four.
 - He ruled over the region in the north, over Galilee where Jesus spent most of his public ministry.
 - So a tetrarch is kind of like a king who ruled over a quarter of his father's kingdom.
 - 'King' is what he would be commonly known as, but he's not really a king.
 - The Romans are in control here; he is their representative, and he needs to keep the peace for Rome.
- We know from Matthew's gospel that Jesus has been ministering in the region controlled by Herod Antipas.
 - There have been large crowds following him, healings, miracles, all of that.
 - We see in v1 that Herod has come to hear of these things.
 - But his response to it is odd.
 - He thinks Jesus is John the Baptist come to life again.
 - That's odd in all kinds of ways.
 - Most people could have told you that Jesus and John were different people, and that they were related.

- It's not like Jesus appeared when John died.
 - And John's ministry was spectacular for its popularity and importance, but we never read of John doing miracles.
 - Yet the reason for Jesus' miracles, according to Herod, is that he is John come back to life.
 - Why would Herod possibly draw this conclusion?
- Some of it, we will see, is a guilty conscience.
 - Herod knows he has mistreated John, and he expects this to end badly for him.
 - Herod is not a religious man, despite being half-Jewish.
 - His lifestyle showed that this was the case.
 - Yet he has superstitions, and he believes in resurrection, which is a common idea among the Pharisees.
 - He sees the same thing the crowds see, Jesus doing miracles, yet he draws markedly different conclusions.
- This reminds us that although Christians are convinced that Jesus is God himself and he came to save all who believe, this is not obvious to other people.
 - Many in our society don't care whether Jesus was even a real person or not.
 - Many think he said some useful teachings.
 - Others will happily say he did miracles.
 - Our Muslim friends will call him a prophet, while our non-Christian Jewish friends will reject him as a charlatan.
 - We cannot assume people will come to accept the truth about Jesus, even if they see the same things we do in what he did.
 - The knowledge of Jesus comes through the work of the Holy Spirit.
 - Herod is misguided. He is probably a little afraid of Jesus.
 - But he doesn't seek Him in repentance and faith. God had not changed his heart, despite his superstition and guilt.
- We don't come to figure out who Jesus is by a popularity contest.
 - If most people think him only a good teacher, or perhaps another person oppressed by a bad government, that doesn't make it true.
 - There is truth about Jesus, explained in the Bible, and applied to us by the Spirit.
 - Jesus is more than a miracle worker, more than a resurrected John the Baptist, and more than a swearword or even a prophet.
 - Jesus is the king. The only way to be saved.
 - That remains true, whatever other crazy ideas people might have of who Jesus is.

TRANSITION *Jesus is the King. That is not a fact that is only interesting for us:*

2. The reality of Jesus demands a response from us (v3-5)
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- The flashback that we see from v3 of our passage gives us information about the past history of John the Baptist and Herod Antipas.
 - The drama involved here is like something you would see on a Korean soap opera or a Brazilian telenovela.
 - To understand what is going on, you need to understand the situation.
 - It would have been well-known to Matthew's first readers, and Josephus the Jewish historian gives us all the details.
 - Herod Antipas was married to an Arabian princess, the daughter of the king of the Nabateans who lived to the south of Israel.
 - This was likely an arranged marriage set up by the Romans; this union would bring stability to an unstable region.
 - And this marriage lasted about 15 years.

- The problems started when Herod Antipas visited Rome and stayed in the house of his half-brother Philip.
 - Philip was married to Herodias.
 - If you're wondering about the name, yes she was named for Herod the Great, and she was the half-niece of Herod Antipas.
 - So Herod Antipas, who was a married man, fell in love with his brother's wife Herodias, a married woman, who was also his niece.
 - He proposed marriage to her, and she accepted, after which they both divorced their current spouses.
- You might guess this caused problems with Arabia; it did.
 - There was fighting on the border, and Herod lost; he needed Rome to help him.
 - Whether Jewish or not, this whole relationship was a scandal that almost everyone was opposed to.
 - Everyday people would be arguing about this in the marketplace.
 - It was politically sensitive and unpopular.
 - And if you were Jewish, there was an extra problem: the law forbade people from marrying their brother's wives while their brother was still alive.
 - This was to stop coveting and restrict sin. You can read it in Lev 18:16 and 20:21.
 - And into this mess stepped John the Baptist.
 - He was wildly popular; Herod himself notes this in v5.
 - He told Herod and Herodias publicly, and repeatedly according to Josephus, that the union was illegal and immoral.
 - Herod feared the public, and he had John arrested.
 - In his version, Mark adds that it was Herodias who really hated John; she held a grudge and looked for ways to get him.
- There is a lot in this for us to think about.
 - The first thing is that we see someone's character by how they respond when their sin is exposed.
 - Herod and Herodias followed their hearts, but by any standard, what they did was wrong.
 - And it clearly broke God's law.
 - John simply spoke the truth. He pointed out their sin.
 - Now it was up to Herod and Herodias to respond to this.
 - They don't deny it is illegal; they don't argue their case; they shut down and arrest the accuser.
 - They use their power to cover over their sin. Or so they thought.
 - Contrast this with someone like David, who repented of his sin, cried out to God and asked for forgiveness.
 - There is none of this here.
- I am sure you don't like it when someone points out sin in your life.
 - If you are married, I hope this happens somewhat regularly. It is something of the blessing of a godly spouse, even if it hurts at the time.
 - Otherwise, I pray your parents, your friends, or your siblings occasionally point out your sin.
 - Others see it more clearly than you do.
 - When that happens, how do you respond?
 - Don't ignore it. Don't shout out, "well, you do something worse!"
 - Consider the claim. Repent if you need to. See it as a blessing, not a curse.
- See, the Christian life is a life of response to the gospel.
 - We believe that we are saved only by what Jesus did for us on the cross in dying and rising again in our place.
 - That is not due to our purity or lack of sin; it is all due to Jesus' work.
 - Yet once we know Jesus, once we accept that we are saved by Jesus' work, we are called to live in response to this.

- We have to live in line with the gospel, even if that goes against our urges and what we want and against what is popular.
 - Herod followed the advice in Disney movies: follow your heart. And he followed it into sin. And he never turned back from that.
 - Christians need to be people who strive for purity, and when sin in our lives is pointed out, we repent and strive to serve Jesus better.
 - This means I need to challenge some of you today.
 - Are you harbouring some secret sin? Are you living in a way that God hates and you know it?
 - Maybe you are in an inappropriate relationship like Herod.
 - Maybe you have a porn addiction, or are greedy, or you have no Bible or prayer in your life?
 - Do something about it. Don't ignore it, feel uncomfortable, then move on.
 - God expects high standards from you. If you're not living up to them, repent and strive to change.
- I want us to also think about the ministry of John the Baptist for a moment.
 - He was very popular with the ordinary people.
 - In other gospels, we see him giving advice to tax collectors, speaking to soldiers, and interacting with religious leaders.
 - Here, he is unafraid to point out the sin of one of the most powerful men in the land.
 - John is consistent. He holds to his principles. He speaks to anyone, for we are all sinners, and we all need to hear of sin and the gospel.
 - Herod is different; he is a politician.
 - Twice in this passage we read of his fear of the people; in v5 and v9.
 - Herod changes his actions based on what others think; John holds to what he believes whoever is in front of him.
- Some use this passage as a great example that Christians should be involved in politics.
 - I don't think that's necessarily the main idea here.
 - Jesus, and John, are not recorded as getting involved in politics or speaking against Roman occupation or the prevailing policies of the day.
 - This episode sees John speaking to one in power about his morality, his personal ethics and law-keeping.
 - I think the main point is John's being prepared to speak the truth to anyone, regardless of who they are.
 - John was not trying to change government policy here; he was speaking to a sinner about his sin, a sinner who happened to be the king.

TRANSITION Holding to principles whoever is looking and whoever they affect is hard work. Which leads to our next point:

3. There will always be terrible injustices against Christians in our sinful world (v6-11)

- It seems that Herod was happy to keep John in prison.
 - Mark 6 reports that Herod listened to John gladly while he was in prison.
 - From v6 of our passage, we see the chain of events that led to John's death.
- Herod held a birthday party; that is common for us, but really unusual in the Bible.
 - It seems Jewish people didn't celebrate birthdays, for the only other birthday party mentioned in the Bible is for Pharaoh in Genesis 40:20.
 - Although Matthew doesn't go into details, I think it is reasonable to assume what kind of party this is.
 - The rich and well-connected of the region gathered together; the presence of a dancing girl among what would probably be a drunken party speaks volumes.
 - This dancing was likely of a suggestive nature before drunken watchers.
 - The fact that the dancing girl was no slave but Herod's stepdaughter makes it worse!

- The oath he promised in v7 when she pleased him sounds like the bravado of someone showing off in front of friends.
- It makes him sound more powerful than he really was; after all, he was a puppet king with little real power.
- It is in v8-9 that Herod realises that he has been outplayed.
 - His wife, Herodias, has planned this to finally get rid of John the Baptist.
 - The gruesome request of his head on a platter is made in v8.
 - Herod has made a public oath; he doesn't want to keep it now, but he cannot lose face in front of his important guests.
 - So he orders it done, and John is beheaded.
 - His head is presented on a platter at the party.
 - And thus John the Baptist's life ends, as a mockery at a party.
 - He is beheaded against Jewish custom, and he is killed without a fair trial against both Jewish and Roman law.
 - Herod adds sin upon sin, injustice upon injustice.
 - And in the end, John dies for telling the truth.
 - There is nothing just about this. This is horrible.
 - Even Herod knows it is horrible. He knows it is unfair.
 - His guilty conscience over this troubled him later when he heard about Jesus, as we saw back in v1-2.
 - There is no way we can make this a fair and reasonable end for the man that Jesus called greater than all the other prophets just a few chapters earlier.
- Notice something important here: John was faithful, he persisted with God when he had strong opposition, he was a great prophet, yet he died in a horrible way.
 - The reason I point this out is that there are teachings in some parts of the Christian church that would deny this.
 - Some say that if you are faithful, if you are persistent, if you are generous enough and evangelistic enough, then God will bless you with a good life.
 - They say you will have health and wealth due to your faithfulness.
 - It sounds like an attractive message.
 - Yet it's not true. It didn't work for John the Baptist.
 - It didn't work for any apostle or prophet that I can think of, actually.
 - If such terrible injustices can happen to someone like John the Baptist, they can happen to us.
 - That's part of living in a sinful world, a world that is predominantly against the cause of Jesus.
- In fact, it is similar to what happens in many parts of the world today.
 - Just have a read of the Barnabas fund information, or Open Doors, on the web.
 - Christians in all kinds of places have a real and present danger of imprisonment, torture or death.
 - That's in Egypt, Iran, North Korea, Vietnam, Somalia and many more places.
 - The truth is that faithful Christians are often persecuted.
 - They often die. They face injustice simply for holding to what they know is true.
- John the Baptist is an inspiring figure despite his awful death.
 - He consistently spoke against sin where he saw it, in soldiers, everyday people, or the king.
 - He held to his principles and remained faithful to his God when opposed, when in prison, when he knew his death was a real possibility.
 - I do hope that I never face imprisonment or death for following Jesus.
 - But the truth is, it is always possible.
 - When we combine this passage with the one before it, with Jesus rejected at Nazareth, we see that rejection and opposition are always a possibility.
 - People might hate you. Authorities might punish you. Your family might think you odd.
 - Your workmates might think you deluded.
 - Your children might think you as wasting your time with God and Jesus.

- Hold the line. Stay faithful.
- Don't change your views or lifestyle because it is unpopular, or because it might lead to opposition, or because the opinion polls say you are wrong.
- What God expects of you is clear. And what God thinks of you matters far more.
- Be prepared to be dishonoured in the eyes of the world and be honoured in the eyes of your Father in Heaven.

TRANSITION *This is a sad passage. It reminds us that our world is full of evil.*

4. How should we respond to such evil? With grief and hope. (v12-13a)
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- Having your head on a platter at a drunken party is the ultimate sign of disrespect.
 - Herod might have been reluctant, but he did it.
 - Every culture in the world treats their dead with respect in some way; this is shocking to us, whatever country we have grown up in.
 - To his credit, Herod did allow some of John's disciples to come for the body of John the Baptist.
 - We see this in v12.
 - These people took John's body, buried it, treated it with due respect, and grieved the teacher they had lost.

- The death of a loved one is always hard to bear.
 - It is right to grieve.
 - We can only imagine what that burial of John would have been like, burying him without his head, knowing of the terrible end to this great man's life.
 - There is no easy way to make sense of such a terrible thing.
 - No eulogy could be said on such an occasion that explains it.
 - Yes, we might say something easy that comes to mind that it is all part of God's plan.
 - That's true, of course.
 - But it doesn't take away the pain.
 - This is horrible. This is unjust. It is plain wrong.
 - Maybe you have experienced that feeling yourself at some time.
 - It could have been at the funeral of a loved one taken too soon.
 - It could be watching the news or finding out about some major injustice.
 - It could be living through the end of a relationship you imagined would last forever.
 - It could be getting a diagnosis that ruins your expectations of life.
 - We will all live through days like that at some point.
 - Days where we cry out to God because it seems unfair. It's not right.
 - And we don't understand why this terrible thing has happened.
 - Grief is the right response to injustice.

- Grief is not enough by itself, though.
 - I think it fair to say that Herod grieved the death of John and his part in it.
 - Look at v9. The king was sorry.
 - Not sorry enough to prevent it, for he was concerned what others thought.
 - But sorry enough for his conscience to draw strange conclusions when he saw what Jesus was doing.
 - Sorrow is not the same as godly grief.
 - Those around us who don't trust in Jesus grieve at loss and death too.
 - But they grieve as those who don't have hope; we have something grief should drive us to.
 - We should be driven to the cross, seeing that God understands injustice.
 - Jesus was perfect, yet he suffered death, a death he did not deserve, because of our sin.
 - God went through the ultimate injustice to deal with sin; your sin and my sin.
 - And because of that, we cannot stop with grief and pain.
 - We need that grief to drive us to Jesus and to lift our eyes to the hope we have in the future.
 - One day, Jesus will return, and we will have all injustices fixed.

- No longer will there be death and pain.
 - And the fair judgement of Jesus will deal with all the injustices in this life.
 - If you're struggling with grief now, look to what is coming if you are a Christian.
 - This is not forever.
 - We might not explain it now; we might have no idea why it is happening.
 - But we know that Jesus cares; he understands injustice.
 - And he will make it right one day.
 - You still have hope. Even on the days it doesn't feel that way.
- The disciples of John told Jesus. I am sure Jesus grieved at the death of John too.
 - We read the start of v13, and the way it is written, it looks like Jesus withdrew in his grief to a desolate place.
 - That's not right, though.
 - What Jesus heard in v13 was not the disciples of John telling him of John's death; v12 is the end of the flashback.
 - No, Jesus heard what Herod had concluded about him in v1-2.
 - So he withdrew. He avoided the attention of Herod for now.
 - His time to die and be brought before the authorities had not yet come.
- Brothers and sisters, this is a sobering passage.
 - We see that holding to our principles about God and Jesus and the Bible will often be unpopular.
 - Trusting in Jesus might lead to people disrespecting you, and possibly it might end up much worse than that in the future.
 - That's a scary thought, but in the end, what God thinks of you matters more.
 - We want God to honour us even if all others dishonour us.
 - Hold to your principles. Be consistent in your speech to others, whether they be cleaners, restaurant workers, or CEOs or politicians.
 - God calls us to steadfast faithfulness, regardless of the opinion polls.
 - Yes, life contains troubles and opposition; but we trust in the One who understands and will bring true justice when he returns.