

Today's gospel sits rather uncomfortably between two accounts of the mission which Jesus entrusted to his disciples in the course of his own preaching ministry. Between Jesus' sending out of his disciples and their return Saint Mark inserts an account about Herod Antipas' interest in Jesus and popular gossip about Jesus which leads to a flashback narrative about the death of John the Baptist.

We are told that Herod held John in some awe. He protected John from those who would have killed him because Herod recognised that he was a holy man even though John disapproved of Herod's marriage to Herodias, his sister-in-law. However, as we are well aware in the story Herod falls into a trap and has to deliver the head of John the Baptist in order to keep a rash promise he makes to his daughter.

A few historical corrections need to be made to Mark's account of the story. Herodias was not actually the wife of Herod's brother Philip. She was the niece of Herod Antipas. She had been married to a brother of Herod but it was not Philip, but another brother who was also called Herod. Historical records show that Philip was actually married to Salome. Someone somewhere mixed up the relationships. However, none of this negates the criticism of John the Baptist because Herod Antipas has still married his brother's wife and this was forbidden in Leviticus.

All this aside the important aspect of the gospel is that once again we hear about John in direct relation to what is being said about Jesus. John, the one who prepared the way for Jesus, who acted as a sign pointing to the Lamb of God, whose ministry was to decrease that Christ's might increase, is once again, even after his death, making another appearance on the stage with Jesus. People are still seeing the ministry of Jesus as being linked to the ministry of John the Baptist. It is as if John has had more of an impact on them than Jesus. For Herod stories of John the Baptist back from the dead cause exasperation. He knows that he had him beheaded but now it seems that he is back to cause trouble all over again.

The anger against John which leads to his execution is attributed by Mark to Herodias because of John's condemnation of her second marriage. Historically, the execution of the man called John the Baptist is explained as being the result of the political threat which his growing popularity posed. Whatever the reason the blame is placed firmly on the shoulders of Herodias while Herod is made out as being the victim of his own foolish promise. In the end Herod shows that his public reputation is more important to him than the life of someone he viewed with fearful respect. To add to the squalor of the scene the head is passed from the soldier to Salome and then to Herodias.

Most of the great figures of the Church which we celebrate throughout the year are remembered on the date of their martyrdom, in churches decorated with red. For John the Baptist, however, very little is made of the memorial of his death, kept on the 29th August. We chose instead to remember the birth of this great man and so we keep the feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist on 24th June each year.

The nativity of John is given more importance than his death because it is so closely linked to the birth of Jesus. The conceptions were unusual because Elizabeth was barren and Mary was a virgin. The parents have visions and the names of the two children are already chosen. Their births are celebrated six months apart. Jesus of course was born at the winter solstice - a rising sun that illuminates the world. And John's birth at the summer solstice reminds us very clearly that it was his vocation was to be a light that would decrease when the greater light would appear.

These two men were to become inextricably linked for the rest of their lives. Not only did John announce the Saviour, but he baptised him and he pointed him out to those who became his first disciples. Along with Jesus and Mary, John is the only one whose birth the Church celebrates.

John is there to remind the Church, the preachers of the gospel and all believers, that we must make way for the one that we announce and whose path we prepare. We must keep pointing out someone greater in order to show Christ to those who seek him. John the Baptist was in this world to prepare a people fit for the Lord. From then until now this has been the mission of the Church - a Church commanded to preach the good news to all nations.

Last week the gospel challenged us to ask whether it was the amount of our faith or the lack of our faith which would amaze Jesus. This week the gospel passage, sandwiched between the sending out of the disciples and their return, makes one very clear point - in those early centuries of the Church discipleship could finally cost you everything. John paid the price. We may never be asked to pay so high a price, but today we really have to ask ourselves what the price of our discipleship would be.