

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Aug 29th 2013

Some days the readings seem to shout a message, and some days, like today, it takes a little more reflection for me to find a helpful message. What finally presented itself for me is the various subplots in Mark's passage.

In something that reads like the "Real Houswives of Galilee," we are presented with a convoluted set of facts about two principal characters. Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great, who apparently had at least 4 wives. Antipas was married to Phasaelis, whom he divorced to marry Herodias.

Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great, and the wife of Antipas' half brother, Herod II (who was thus her brother-in-law and also her half-uncle). Herodias and Herod II had a daughter, Salome, making her Herod Antipas' half niece (and his stepdaughter once he married Herodias).

Herodias decided to divorce Herod II to marry Antipas, who was then tetrach of Galilee. John the Baptist chastised Antipas for his divorce and subsequent marriage to his former sister-in-law. Reading between the lines, John has apparently irritated everyone by his condemnation of the marriage, but most especially Herodias. Antipas seems to be easily manipulated by Herodias, and Mark stated that he both feared John and was perplexed by his teachings. Antipas also seems to have been aroused by Salome's dance and thus had even more moral ambiguity going on in his head.

We have a prophet doing what prophets do – calling out bad behavior and calling for repentance and reform. We also have a manipulator orchestrating events to get what she wants, and we have a confused man who is afraid to act on his own conscience but instead bows to the pressure of another.

Antipas doesn't like what John says, but also is too afraid to do what is right. He is perplexed because he knows what is right in his heart, but doesn't want to admit it. He is paralyzed by a moral dilemma of his own making. He wants to please his wife, but also feels guilty for lusting after his stepdaughter and so makes the decision to kill John rather than recant on his unthinking promise to Herodias.

I think we all run into situations like this (well, not exactly like this – even by the low standards of today's "reality" TV shows this seems like a pretty extreme plot line!). In our heart we know what is right, but the seductive power of another (a person, an attraction, an emotion, a food, a job, a duty, a diversion, a pleasant experience, etc.) confuses us and pulls us away from the path we know is right.

In the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius calls on the retreatant to recognize what attractions healthily lead us closer to God, and which are disruptive and lead us away from God, and thus to avoid the distractions if we are forthrightly seeking God. Easily said, but difficult to practice in all cases. Antipas and Herodias present a pretty easy case to analyze given the extremity of the consequences. But most of our attractions can be subtle and thus create a gradual, rather than a pronounced, movement in the wrong direction. For example, food is good, but do we eat to live or live to eat? Television is a nice

form of entertainment, but does it dominate our lives? Electronic communication makes our lives easier, but have we become enslaved by it to the detriment of interpersonal relationships? The internet is a wonderful tool, but also can be a powerfully addictive force.

And so my prayer today is to be aware of what attracts me, and why, and for the grace to discern if those attractions are positive influences intended by God or negative distractions from the path that God calls me to take.

Tom Purcell