

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Aug 1st 2015

Memorial of Saint Alphonsus Liguori, Bishop and Doctor of the Church

The Gospel for today's liturgy sounds like the beginning or ending of a novel. There is some sleaze, some misuse of regal power and some righteous confrontation of power by truth. There is a death, some misidentification and a lot of kingly weakness in the face of apparent innocence. It sounds a little like Shakespeare's tragedies all mixed together. There is no other scriptural account of John's reminding Herod of the section from the eighteenth chapter of Leviticus which, in verse sixteen, states that no man can sexually take the wife of his own brother. This reminder of the Jewish law pleases Herod not at all, nor Herodias, the mother of the daughter who delighted Herod with her dancing. We do not know why she wants the head of John but perhaps she, herself, has also been challenged for her not living the customs and traditions of her Jewish faith.

John is not exactly challenging Herod for his sexual relationships, but rather something deeper. If we were to wish to read this chapter from Leviticus, we would read that living the marriage regulations is one way a faithful Jew will be different from the other alien tribes. Keeping the law is not so much to please God, but rather keeping the regulations of the law will keep reminding faithful Jews who in God's eye they are; the beloved and chosen people of God.

A question I did have upon reading these verses was just why Herod was bothered by Jesus. What had he heard which threatened him and his little kingdom. In the previous chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has been relating and explaining various parables about a "kingdom" which is like a sower who sows seeds, like a growing mustard seed, like a treasure or pearl found or a fishing net resulting in some fish saved and others thrown away. Matthew follows these parables with Herod's feeling his kingdom, his power, his identity being diminished. So Herod, in Matthew's arrangement of things, begins to work toward his participation in getting rid of Jesus just as he got rid of the annoyance of John. I would suggest our reading the previous chapter's parables to see what of our little kingdoms is threatened by their meaning. It is a prayerful reflection to become aware of how Jesus' teachings can annoy us and we can have the same reaction as Herod, "Get rid of all that stuff! I am my own kingdom! I don't want to be reminded who God says I am! I will decide! I will hear who others tell me I am!"

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