

Mark 6:1-29: Conflict

Series: Following Jesus: Studies in Mark's Gospel

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Texts: Mark 6:1-29; Ezekiel 3:16-21; Romans 8:31-39

What ought to be the church's relationship to the rest of society? Should it be cooperation or conflict? Should the church withdraw to form islands of light in a sea of darkness? Or should it go with the culture, seeking to discern the Spirit at work in the world? Australia has a secular constitution. It is set up such that there is no religious test for public office, nor preferential treatment for any particular religion. For the most part this has meant harmonious cooperation between governments and churches. However, many people argue that to live in a secular society means that religion ought to be excluded from the public square altogether. Chances are if you're a Christian you've felt that pressure. It's ok to speak on some issues, but in others, there is a cultural pressure to remain silent. That question, what is the church's relationship with society is also a personal question. If I'm a Christian, what should my relationship be like with those around me?

We've been looking at 3 themes in Mark's Gospel. Who is Jesus? What is the Kingdom of God? And How do we follow Jesus? The key theme in our text today, Mark 6:1-29, is that the Kingdom of God provokes conflict. If you've been paying attention you may have noticed this theme already in Mark. Jesus has been in conflict with the Jewish authorities - the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. His own family think he's out of his mind and have tried to take charge of him. In the parable of the sower he has said that trouble and persecution will come because of the word. I suspect there is no definitive answer as to that question of what the church's relationship to the rest of society ought to be. But our text today tells us that we can expect there to be conflict. Most of us don't like conflict, but as followers of Jesus the King, we should not be surprised by it, indeed we can be ready for it. If you're here and you're not yet a Christian, my hope is today's text will help you see more of why Christianity should be different from the world around it. We're going to look at this theme in the 3 episodes in our text today, scene 1 - a prophet without honour, scene 2

- take nothing for the journey, scene 3 - Herod was greatly puzzled. So let's have a look together.

1. A prophet is without honour in his hometown (1-6)

Have a read with me Mark 6:1-5

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. **2** When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? **3** Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. **4** Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.”

For our Asian friends, in English we have a saying, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” This means you look down on something that you know well. This is the problem Jesus encounters. The people in his hometown think they know Jesus. After all, he grew up there. “Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son?” But Jesus says and does things that don’t conform to their expectations. And rather than letting Jesus be himself, they take offense. They answer the question, “Who is Jesus?” with “He’s who I say he is.” And when he doesn’t fit their box they get angry.

I find this moment so instructive when it comes to thinking about the place of the church in Western culture. In his book *Dominion: the making of the Western mind*, secular historian Tom Holland shows that the culture and morality of the West has been primarily and indelibly shaped by the Bible in general and the gospel in particular. But the intellectual project of the West for the past 300 years has been to throw off the shackles of our Christian childhood and move into the enlightened rationality of our adulthood. Familiarity breeds contempt. Our culture thinks it knows Jesus and the Christian faith. But in fact it has forgotten, or only half remembers. It wants Jesus on its own terms. So when the church proclaims God’s

wisdom found in the Bible, or when the power of God is displayed in the life of God's people, and these don't fit our culture's expectations, the culture takes offense. And what is the result? Read with me verse 5.

5 He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. 6 He was amazed at their lack of faith.

We think that the church is dying because it is declining in the West. But in fact the church is growing at a faster rate than ever before. Where? In the majority world. There the faith of the church is great. There miracles abound. People are willing to listen and see and believe. Christianity is still new and they know their need. They see the great blessings that the Christian faith brings. Equality of all people before God. Freedom to serve. Love of neighbour. Care of the poor. Justice for the widow, the fatherless and the foreigner. Turning the other cheek. Taking the log out of your own eye. Forgiving even as God forgives you. Our problem in the West is pride. We take these things for granted and think that we've come up with all the blessings of our culture. We forget the deep wellspring of the West is the Gospel of Christ.

As followers of Christ, we should not be surprised or discouraged at the lack of faith we see around us. It's hard ground. A prophet is not without honour, except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home. And at the same time we trust Jesus' words about the kingdom - that God is still at work growing his kingdom, though it looks the size of a mustard seed. In fact, this should shake us free from our pride and drive us to him, because only he can change hearts of stone and make them hearts of flesh.

And for each of us, but especially if you're not a believer. Will you hear and receive Jesus' wisdom and power, though it's not what you expect? Or will you take offense and miss who he really is?

Let's have a look at the second scene in verses 7-13.

2. Take nothing for the journey (7-13)

In these verses Jesus sends the church on mission.

Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. (7)

I take it that the Twelve here represent God's new covenant people, the Church. Notice in verse 12, that the Twelve are doing just what Jesus has been doing in Mark's gospel.

12 They went out and preached that people should repent. **13** They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

First preaching. What is their message? Jesus' first words in Mark are "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." Here we see that little summary in verse 12 - "They went out and preached that people should repent." Second, they heal the sick and drive out demons, just like we saw Jesus do in chapter 5. This is proclaiming the kingdom of God in word and action. Jesus gives his church, us, the authority to do this. That is our mission as the church.

In verses 8-11 Jesus' tells the church how it is to conduct itself while on his mission. First we are to travel light and trust God.

8 These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. **9** Wear sandals but not an extra shirt.

Sometimes Jesus' words here have been taken quite literally. When I studied theology my next door neighbour, Alfred, from Uganda was doing a PhD. He is now a bishop there. As a young man he was training to be a witch doctor under his grandmother. But one day he became very ill. Two traveling evangelists happened to stop by his bed. They prayed for him and he was healed. "Right," they said. "Now that Jesus has healed you, you need to come with us to the next village and share your story." And off he went and he has never looked back.

Alfred's experience is so far outside of ours. But as we as a church spend the next few months developing our vision and strategy for the next 5 years, I believe this text has much we need to hear. Last year we as a staff team read *Center Church*, a book on

ministry by Tim Keller. In the book he talks about how for churches to grow they need to be both institutions and movements. This is what he writes,

“Churches with no movement dynamics are like a person on a life support machine. I have seen at least 3 ways in which churches survive without movement dynamics.” Number 2 is this:

“Some churches have a substantial endowment and a building that serves as a community center for the local population. In this situation, there is no need for outside financial or leadership assistance in the near term, but the church does not produce additional resources or dynamism to sustain growth through conversions and the spiritual growth of its members. It essentially operates as a well-run business. Finances come from a judiciously managed endowment, supplemented by income from rental fees, and a few donations.”¹

Yes, we are called to be prudent and wise as stewards of the gifts that God has given us. But these can become idols if we depend on them and fail to trust God. The resources he has given us are not to be stored for a rainy day. They don't guarantee our future. If we are to do the mission Jesus has given us, we need to hold lightly to the resources he has entrusted to us, and use them for the building of his Kingdom.

Second, we are to go where the door is open.

10 Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. **11** And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

This text is very confronting. Only God can change the heart. If, through us he knocks, and people don't open the door, then we're to move on. But where we do find welcome, we stay. This calls for spiritual discernment in our witness and sharing of our faith. But, thinking for us as a church, maybe it means stopping ministries that once found an open door, but now have only found closed hearts and rejected invitations.

Let's have a look at our third scene.

¹ Tim Keller, *Center Church*, Zondervan, 2012: 337-338

3. Herod was greatly puzzled (14-29)

The theme of these verses is that the Kingdom of God provokes conflict. This confrontation between Herod and John the Baptist is one of those moments of conflict between Church and State. I find it so interesting that this episode cuts across both a progressive and a conservative reading of the text.

In a progressive reading here you have a prophet speaking truth to power and a text that exposes injustice. Herod the aging despot takes advantage of his step daughter Salome and parades her as some sort of trophy to his watching officials. Her mother Herodias exploits Herod's weakness for pretty girls and uses her own daughter to get her revenge. It's a gross failure of parenting and abuse of power that leads to the grave injustice of executing an innocent man. The context for John's grisly execution is Herod displaying his power and wealth to the leading men of his kingdom, Galilee. The irony is that he shows himself a slave to his own appetites and the manipulations of his wife.

In a conservative reading, what is the root sin that gives birth to all the other wickedness in this sordid episode? Adultery. Sexual sin. Sleeping with someone who is not your spouse. The breaking of God's law, in this particular regard. "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." John names the sacred cow. Herodias is furious that John has called out her sin, angry enough to kill him. Because that's what you have to do to silence the voice of conscience. Sin gives birth to sin. Herodias uses sex to manipulate Herod. And having compromised in one area, it's easier to compromise in another. Rather than own his mistakes, out of pride and vanity, to save face, Herod adds to adultery murder.

Which reading is right? The answer of course is both. Because the truth of God's word is not the handmaid of progressive or conservative morality. It stands independent and over them both, showing their blindspots and exposing their idols. You can't have the Bible's vision of justice without its sexual ethics and vice versa. Sin you see doesn't discriminate. Greed and Lust are both disordered desires that devastate individuals and communities and defy God. Nor is the Kingdom of God the birthright of either progressive or conservative politics. The Kingdom of God brings

to light sin and injustice and calls for all to repent and believe the good news. That is that Christ is king. He brings justice and hope, healing and forgiveness. But you and I have to bow the knee before him.

The story of John's execution is one of those Markan sandwiches. It comes in between Jesus' sending out his disciples and them returning to report on their mission. The kingdom of God provokes conflict, and the point is that as followers of Christ who are sent out to proclaim the kingdom in word and deed, we should expect conflict. It may even cost us our life. But did you notice that Herod suspects that there is something beyond the secular, this worldly frame of existence? If this world is all there is, then truth and justice are determined by those in power. That is the world in which Herod lives. But he likes listening to John, even though he's puzzled. Because John holds out the possibility that right and wrong are not the plaything of those in power but upheld by the one who will bring true justice, the King of God's kingdom. When Herod hears of Jesus he is afraid that he might be John come back from the dead. And if that were the case then he would have to give an account of his life to the true King.

What Herod feared in Jesus has come. Following Jesus may be costly, but in the end the Kingdom of God will triumph, because Christ has been raised from the dead and will come again in glory. The kingdoms of this world will fall. Evil will be shown for what it is. Only God's kingdom will remain. Our hope is in the resurrection of the dead. And so, though conflict comes, we need not fear. But we can with boldness proclaim the Kingdom in word and deed. May God strengthen us by his Spirit to that end.