

## Introduction

What sells newspapers?

Three things, and if they are combined so much the better: Royalty; almost any story about a member of a Royal family will sell, not only in Britain or Norway or wherever it began but around the rest of the world. Sex; There is nothing like a scandal especially if it is to do with people in high places. Religion; though God has slipped down the ratings in recent years, people are still aware that there are unanswered questions out there, and someone who seems to be an authentic spokesperson for God is newsworthy.

Put this package together, locate it in 1st century Galilee and you have the story of John the Baptist and King Herod. Herod, the political leader of Israel was in a tight spot. As ruler of Israel he needed to be seen to keep the laws of Torah. But as a ruler appointed by Rome and under their authority he needed to maintain peace.

When John and Jesus came preaching about sin and repentance they were threatening the political stability of an occupied land. The religious leaders were furious about their teaching and saw it as subversive. It is all too easy for fragile governments to see any sort of challenge as coming from forces of evil, rebels and agitators. Yet people like, John remind us that 'ordinary people' who challenge a regime can be agents of God.

John the Baptist caused real problems for Herod. He publically challenged his immoral lifestyle and fitness to be King of Israel. Not only had Herod married his brother's wife which was against the teachings of Moses, but she was actually his niece, which was also against the Jewish Laws and considered to be an incestuous relationship. There had probably been mutterings amongst the religious leaders and down the synagogue about how terrible this was but John actually stood up in public and accused the King of immorality.

His response, as a concession to his wife, who was furious about the public humiliation, was to send his soldiers to arrest him and throw him into prison. You would have expected him to either have him killed then or simply leave him to rot in jail, but oddly he did neither. Mark tells us that Herod protected John

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

from further attack by Herodius, his wife and, more than that was in the habit of listening to him.

*<sup>19</sup> So Herodias bore a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But without Herod's approval she was powerless, <sup>20</sup> for Herod respected John; and knowing that he was a good and holy man, he protected him. Herod was greatly disturbed whenever he talked with John, but even so, he liked to listen to him.*

King Herod was fascinated by what John had to say but couldn't bring himself to act on it. He returned again and again to listen but was unable to respond to what he told him and change his life.

Eventually Herod was forced into action by his wife. He found himself cornered into doing the wrong thing but didn't have the strength of character to refuse. He was afraid that he would lose face in front of his friends and other powerful people. Herod was celebrating his birthday and it is clear that the drink was flowing and people were getting excitable. In situations like that where people sweep each other along with their enthusiasms it can be hard to take a step back.

Herod, carried away in the moment, was overwhelmed by his step daughter's dancing. In a grand gesture he promised her anything she asked for. Directed by her furious and unpleasant mother the girl asked for John the Baptists head on a plate. What was Herod to do? To say no would mean backing down from his promise in front of his friends and other leaders. To say yes meant committing a terrible injustice against an innocent man. The cost was too high. Herod would rather lose John than his own pride and desire for influence.

This story teaches us two important lessons

**1) Herod had put off his decision to follow God's word.**

He was 'not quite ready for it'. He was fascinated by John's preaching and disturbed by it but unable to respond to it in a positive way. In the event, the decision was forced on him at a time when he was least ready to make it. In dealing

with our sins, there is never a time when we are 'more ready'. We must deal with them now or we may not be able to deal with them later.

## **2 Herod seemed to be the prisoner of one particular sin.**

In his case it was sexual sin. But no sin exists in isolation. When we turn to follow our own road we find each wrong turn affecting every decision we make and action we take. Like so many people Herod discovered that failure to deal with the sin he had been confronted with is simply the symptom of failure to deal with sin in general. His spiritual life was eventually ruined by the sin of pride.

No wonder Herod's conscience was so tender when he heard about Jesus' ministry. But this was more a sense of alarm than a spirit of repentance. The tenderness of his conscience did not last. When he reappears in the Gospels, it is as a hardened man. That was why, when Jesus was brought before him during his trial, he had nothing to say. For rather than seeking forgiveness, Herod wanted to be amused by Jesus: he 'hoped to see him perform some miracle' (Lk 23:8). So he plied Jesus with many questions but Jesus gave him no answer. The real Herod was then displayed: 'He ridiculed and mocked him' (Lk 23:11). Having rejected the preaching of John, he ended up ridiculing the one whom John had said was greater than himself. In the end God had no more to say to Herod.

The lesson is crystal clear. Unless we silence sin, deal with it when it confronts us, sin will silence our conscience. We will become so hardened to our waywardness and so deaf to the voice of God that we will see no other path. Unless we heed God's word, the day may come when we despise God's son - and then God will have nothing more to say to us.

You may be thinking, "Hang on a moment Angela, that's not fair. I am not immoral and I'm certainly not a murderer. This doesn't apply to me." However the principle is the same. If we consistently ignore a noise that annoys us we will stop paying attention to it and even eventually stop hearing it. If we consistently ignore the sore spot where our shoes rub our feet a callous will form and we will no longer feel the rub. If we continue to walk past the needy person in the street we will no longer notice them.

If God challenges our conscience about something in our life we ignore it at our peril. Having walked past the cross roads it can become impossible to walk back