

The Clash of the Kingdoms

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[0 : 00] Now, if you could have your Bibles open at the moment, please. And before we look at this passage, we'll pray together. That's the Lord's help. God, our Father, I pray that you will take my human words in all their weakness and limitation, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

And so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen. I have a recurring dream.

I'm in a familiar building, which I know extremely well, or I'm in a street in a town that I know very well, or I'm in a part of the landscape that I'm very familiar with.

I'm just about to open the door and go into the rest of the building, or turn the street corner, and suddenly everything is changed.

The building is not familiar at all. I can never remember having been in it before. When I turn the street corner, I'm in a place I have never seen before.

[1 : 16] Why am I saying this? It's because when I read this passage, I had exactly the same sensation. I felt utterly disorientated. Look at the verse immediately before the passage that was read for us.

Jesus has sent out the twelve on a mission which has been extremely successful. They went out, verse 12, and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed with oil.

Many people were ill and healed them. Jump ahead to verse 30. The apostles gathered round Jesus and reported to him all that they had done and taught. Now that makes perfect sense, doesn't it?

The story runs on without a break. So why is this long interlude here? That's the first question we have to ask before we actually look at the detail of the passage.

And it is a long digression. We've noticed already that Mark is concise. But for some reason, this story is long. Matthew tells the same story, but it's only about two-thirds the length.

[2 : 25] And not only is it a digression, it's a flashback. The only one in the Gospel. We're going back to a much earlier period, indeed to the period of chapter 1.

So why is it here? And to add to the problems, Jesus isn't mentioned after verse 14. John the Baptist is here only as a victim.

And the story is nasty and gruesome. What on earth can we learn from an unedifying tale of a fickle, superstitious man, of a scheming woman, and of a gruesome execution?

Because these are materials here. I want to say two things. I've never read and reflected on the passage. There came one of what's nowadays called a lightbulb moment.

And it came in the very first word. King Herod. Look at verse 14. King Herod. And again, in verse 22 and 26, the king.

[3 : 27] And in verse 23, the kingdom. Let me explain what I mean. Herod here is not Herod the Great, who was involved so nastily in the story of the birth of Jesus.

He's dead many years. This Herod is called Herod Antipas. And he's one of the sons of Herod the Great. And Herod, in his will, said that his kingdom, the Roman province of Judea, should be divided into three parts.

Antipas, this man, given Galilee and Perea. And his other sons, Philip and Lysanias, given other parts of it.

Could you keep your finger here and jump ahead to page 1029, please. And you'll see what I mean. This is Luke's account of the beginning of the ministry of the Baptist.

This is what he says. In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip, tetrarch of Aeturia and Trachonitis, and Lysias, tetrarch of Abilene.

[4 : 36] See, there are only tetrarchs, rulers of part of the kingdom. During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

Talk about marginalizing the good and the great. The word of God bypasses all of them and comes to the Baptist. Now, you see the point. This is the only place in the Gospels that Antipas is called king.

Elsewhere, he's called the tetrarch. And in the overall scheme of things of the Roman emperor, the Roman governor, the high priest, he's little more than the chairman of a district council.

But king is what he thinks of himself. King is what he loves to be. I am the king and I like being the king and I'm going to have my own way.

Now, earlier on in the Gospel, at the very beginning, Mark has told us that John the Baptist came preaching repentance and forgiveness.

[5 : 38] That's back in chapter 1, verse 4. Then Herod puts him in prison and Jesus, in Mark 1, verse 15, comes preaching the kingdom of God.

King Herod and King Jesus. That is the point that Mark is making, surely. And thus our title for today, The Clash of the Kingdoms.

And if you remember the film, The Clash of the Kingdoms, you'll probably recognize the echo. It doesn't matter. That's the first thing. But the second thing, surely, why it's here is because, once again, if you glance back at the passage we looked at last week, the twelve are sent out on a mission.

And that mission is spectacularly successful. There has been opposition. There has been criticism. And yet, it's been spectacularly successful.

I'm sure this is a stark reminder that even when the kingdom of God is progressing successfully, the kingdom of the world is always opposing, always trying to hinder.

[6 : 42] Later on, Jesus is to warn the twelve, look out for the leaven, look out for the peace of Herod. The hypocrisy. The thing that infiltrates into all of life and affects everything.

And as we'll see, John's death here foreshadows the death of Jesus himself. So it's a powerful dramatizing of Mark's basic message, is it not?

King Herod or King Jesus. Remember, way back, a few weeks ago, the parable of the sword. Herod proved to be an unfertile sword.

So that's how we're going to look at it. And later on, Jesus is to say, what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?

Herod lost his soul from a petty kingdom of Galilee. And because he was afraid to lose face before his friends. Sorry, that introduction was a bit long, but I think it was necessary to put it in context.

[7 : 47] I want to ask, I want to make three points there. The kingdom of the world can sometimes appear genuinely interested in the kingdom of God. That's really verses 14 to 16.

King Herod heard about this. This, of course, is the mission of the twelve. And, of course, the mission of Jesus himself. And these events in Galilee.

Now, Herod's attitude was unlivable. He was a superstitious man and an indecisive man. And he's first thought, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead.

And that is why miraculous deeds are shown in him. He was interested enough to ask questions, but not interested enough to be a disciple.

That is the first thing. And that tells us that miracles are not enough to convince people. About 30 years ago, a man called John Wimber wrote a book called Power Evangelism.

[8 : 46] In that book, he argued that people would come flocking into the kingdom of God if there were miracles. If people were healed. If people were exercised.

And all these kind of miracles that happened in the Gospels. Now, Wimber made two basic mistakes there. He was a good man and said many good things. First of all, the Gospel Word is not something that is accompanied by the power of God and needs miracles.

The Gospel Word is the power of God to salvation. And there is surely no greater miracle than when someone comes from unbelief, from death to life, to hearing the Word of God and the power of the Spirit of God.

The biggest mistake was that in Jesus' ministry, it didn't happen all the time either. Jesus lost perhaps a more spectacular miracle, raising of Lazarus.

His enemies went away and said, I would like to think they had gone away and said, we'll have to take this man seriously. Well, they didn't. They went away and said, we'll have to destroy him.

[9 : 55] Miracles can always be explained away. And by the way, I believe that God can and does, when he chooses, still do miracles of that kind. They're not denying that for a moment.

But they're within his power, within his problem. So, miracles are not enough. And the second thing about the world's interest is, the world is quite happy to hear about miracles.

But it's not very happy to hear about repentance and forgiveness. Everybody who comes to Christ, these two elements are there. Repentance, turning away from the old life, and forgiveness.

God making us into new people. It's interesting, although I've said, verse 15, he is Elijah. Now, Jesus himself compared John the Baptist to Elijah.

And the prophet Malachi had said, at the end of the Old Testament, Elijah will come and prepare the way for the Lord coming to his temple. Not, of course, that John the Baptist was in reincarnation of Elijah, but his ministry was like Elijah's.

[11 : 04] He burst on the scene like a meteor, as Elijah had done. He had crowds flocked to hear him, came from all over the country to the River Jordan to hear him, and he'd hear the message of repentance, and some responded.

Many didn't. And Herod was one who didn't. And Herod, of course, heard more from John, as we'll see in a moment, than almost anybody else. We're told there's 20.

He liked to listen to him. So, the world's interest can often be genuine. But secondly, the world is unwilling to sacrifice popularity for the sake of repentance and forgiveness.

Now, notice verse 17. This is 17 to 20, really. Herod himself. There is no question of Herod's guilt here. Herod had taken the initiative in imprisoning John.

And we're told in Matthew tells him he wanted to kill him. Now, that, of course, is not a contradiction of Herod, because he liked him.

[12 : 14] But Herod was a man who vacillated. And sometimes, you could imagine, he went away from here in totally furious and wanted to kill him. So, he is responsible.

He imprisons him in the royal palace of Machias at the Dead Sea. And here emerged as a far more formidable character. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married.

Now, Herod, of course, had been married already to the king of Nabatea in the south. And that was, of course, in the later years, that his reign of Grecian had probably divorced her and married Herodias.

Herodias, almost certainly a younger woman than his wife he had divorced. But, at this point, he had no interest in killing the Baptist.

Look at verse 20. Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man.

[13 : 14] Whereas Herodias, we are told, nursed and grudged. He had it in for John. Now, you see, while Herod was weak and vacillating, Herodias was fanatical.

Now, when fanaticism meets weakness and vacillation, fanaticism is always going to win. And Herodias is waiting for an opportune moment to strike.

But I want to linger for a moment on this phrase in verse 20. Herod liked to listen to the Baptist. You can imagine the scene.

Herod sends for John from his prison, brings him up to his private room, and listens carefully and with real interest. In other words, the living word came to him again and again and again.

And yet, he keeps putting off a decision. It's always easy to put off a difficult decision, isn't it? Wait till tomorrow. Wait till next week.

[14 : 19] Wait till next month. Wait till next year. The decision never becomes easier, does it? We all know that. Christians or non-Christians, we all know that.

When we ought to do something and don't do it, it becomes more and more and more difficult. I've often seen, in the years when I was in regular ministry, I've often seen this.

People would show a real interest. They would attend and they would like to listen. People would say, I really enjoy these sermons. I like the Bible studies. I like coming here.

I like the singing. And then, they would simply not respond. There would come a time when they realised that if they responded, it would need radical change. And that's what Herod realised. It can happen when we were Christians as well. Painful and radical change often needed. And it has happened throughout history.

[15:18] In the 18th century, there was a great revival associated with John and Charles Wesley and George Whitfield. And George Whitfield, an absolutely spellbinding preacher.

I've often wished that there had been recording in those days. He said that it hurt him because he apparently mesmerised the crowds as he spoke. There was also this time a great flourishing of drama associated with the Shakespearean actor-manager, David Garrick.

And David Garrick loved to go and hear Whitfield. And he once wrote, I would give a hundred guillotine to be able to say all the way that Mr Whitfield does.

I tried it as well. And of course, there was great criticism. And one of the great critics was the Edinburgh-born philosopher, David Hume.

And David Hume, in the coffee houses, in those days coffee houses, where the intellectuals met and discussed matters of the day.

[16:19] And very often, Hume would lead in mockery of Whitfield. And one day, Hume was met by a friend as he hurried across Longing Bridge.

And the friend says, where are you going in such a hurry? He said, I'm going to your Whitfield. And his friend, Gass, you don't believe any of that stuff, do you? No, he said, not Whitfield does.

It would be nice to think that Hume eventually came to the face. I don't know if he did or if he didn't. But you see, it's the same kind of thing. A real interest. Listen to him gladly.

And this so often happens. And of course, it can happen with Christians as well. Listen gladly, they do nothing. So, that's the second thing. The world, the first thing, the world's interest can be genuine.

The world is unwilling to sacrifice popularity and make the radical change. But thirdly, the world often seems to win.

[17:21] And this is verses 21 to 29, where the story now speeds up. Herodias had been waiting to pounce. And at last, here is her chant. Herod's birthday party.

Verse 21. Finally, opportune time came. For on his birthday, Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders, long-leaning men of Galilee, and so on.

A man's dinner. Now, I'm not giving anything away when I say that a man's dinner is a tense of an awful lot of bragging, an awful lot of drinking, an awful lot of foolish, loose talk.

But I don't want to misunderstand that. A man called Josephus, a Jewish historian, who tells a great deal about the background of the Gospels, and indeed tells us quite a lot about Herod Antipas, says that Herod Antipas loved to throw drunken parties.

I've heard sermons on this passage read a kind of moralising rant about the danger of drunken parties. I'm not, of course, saying that men bragging of drunken parties is a good thing.

[18:28] But remember this. Herod was not lost because he threw a drunken party. Herod was lost because he rejected the living word of God when it came to him.

And then he, obviously, you could imagine the scene, this girl comes in to dance. Undoubtedly, she's a pretty girl.

And you could imagine the kind of rude, rubble remarks around the table, largely of a woo variety. That's the kind of scene here. But the point is that Mark is not emphasising that he chooses not to. The point is he is emphasising that Herod rejected the word of God. And this brag here, once again, notice, of course, verse 20, that the king said to the girl.

And then, verse 25, the girl hurried in to the king. You see, this is a man who could not have given the humblest village away without the permission of the Roman emperor and Pilate the governor.

[19:42] And yet he's bragging, saying, I'll give you half of my kingdom. And so the girl goes and says, Mum, what will I ask for? Herodias sees her chance.

Ask for the head of the domeniis. It's a chilling story, isn't it? And notice how he, at once the girl hurried to the king, verse 25, with a request.

I want you to give me the head, not right now, the head of John the Baptist on a dish. How does Herod react, verse 26? The king was greatly distressed because of his oath.

The man had made a fool of himself. He had spoken unwisely. And he was in the world. But as I say, it's not because he had drunk and party.

It's because he rejected the living word of God. And it came to him. It's interesting. Mark doesn't tell us this, but Luke tells us.

[20 : 45] But when Jesus stood on trial for his life, lolus was delighted to discover that he was from Galilee. So he sent him to Herod.

Herod, of course, with his love of the spectacular, wanted to see a miracle. And Jesus refused. Jesus said nothing to him because there was nothing to say.

He rejected the word of God. There was nothing more to say. And so Jesus stood before Herod. But the day will come when Herod will stand before Jesus. And that is what this story is pointing to. One detail I want you to notice as we finish.

Verse 29. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. Hardly sounds encouraging, does it?

[21 : 47] Like then in the book of Genesis, Joseph in a coffin in Egypt. Until we remember, of course, that we believe in a God who knows his way out of the tomb. And later on, and surely an echo of this passage.

Flash forward to 1546. And the body of Jesus is laid in the tomb. Surely a deliberate echo of this. But the laying of Jesus' body in the tomb is only going to be the forerunner of the day.

When everyone will judge the living and the dead. When he rises, as an African poet said, every Herod dies and comes to stand alone before the Lamb who sits upon the throne.

So you see, this is a story. And it actually fits in so well with Mark. I hope you agree with me. That it's about the basic themes of Mark.

King Herod or King Jesus. Let me finish with this story. It's an apocryphal one. But then most picture stories are apocryphal. The devil summoned his demons.

[22 : 59] And wanted one of them to go in and tempt the world, tempt humanity. And one of them said, Oh, I'll go and bring persecution. The devil said, No.

When persecution happens, the church tends to grow. The blood of the martyrs, the seed of the church and all that. Another one said, No. I'll go and spread false teaching. The devil again said, No.

When that happens, the enemy, that versus the Lord himself, raises up good teachers. Another one said, I'll go into the world. I'll tell them the gospel is true.

That Jesus died and rose again and he will return to judge. Because everybody laughed. And the demon said, And I'll tell them they don't need to do anything about it at the moment.

And the devil said, Yes. That is the way. Now is the accepted time. Now is the day of salvation. Amen. That's great.

[23 : 58] Lord, we are often so weak. We procrastinate. We keep putting off. Help us, Lord, to renew our allegiance, or perhaps to make it for the first time, to King Jesus, to turn our back on the King Herod of our lives.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.