



Sermon preached by Dr Alan Rickard on 11th July 2021

Readings: 2 Samuel 6: 1 - 5 and 12b – 19, Ephesians 1: 3 – 14, Mark 6: 14 - 29

This Sunday lies in the calendar between the fourth of July, celebrating American Independence from its colonial power Britain, as a culmination of the War of 1775 - 1783, and the fourteenth of July, commemorating the storming of the Bastille in Paris in 1789 - the symbolical beginning of the overthrow of the *ancien régime*. Is there still not a whiff of revolutionary gun smoke in the air? Two hugely important events in the course of eighteenth century history celebrated this month have ramifications right down to the present day. I'm forgetting - it's data not dates!

The first theme of today's address running through all three lectionary readings is the use and abuse of power. So we have already heard in the Sharing Together of King David's triumphal progression of the Ark into Jerusalem. It is of huge symbolic significance for David's authority and the consolidation of his power, both over the people of Israel and in the eyes of his enemies.

Baron Acton's nineteenth century dictum states that 'power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. He goes on to say that 'great men are almost always bad men, even when they exert influence and not authority.... Despotism is always accompanied by corruption of morality'.

This leads us into the Gospel reading. The very graphic description of the circumstances surrounding the death of John the Baptist in Mark's Gospel speaks to us down the centuries. Not for him was the public humiliation, trial and slow execution by crucifixion between two criminals on Calvary hill. John died abruptly and presumably somewhat privately in the confines of imprisonment on Herod's orders, at the whim of Herodias, his sister-in-law, and her daughter.

Interestingly, this is the only narrative in Mark's Gospel not directly about Jesus. Mark presents it using the narrative device of a backstory.

Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, has become aware of Jesus's teaching and the work of the Twelve, sent out in pairs, calling people to repent, casting out demons and healing the sick. Herod is afraid that John the Baptist, whom he beheaded, has come back from the dead.

But before the back story, a reminder of John's power and influence that were a threat to Herod's rule. John the Baptist, was born to Zachary and Elizabeth, his ancient wife, some six months before Christ's birth in Bethlehem. As a young man he withdrew into the desert. In his thirties he began his ministry, preparing the way for the Messiah by calling people to repent and baptising them with water as a sign of purification. As Jesus approached him by the River Jordan, John exclaimed: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" and baptised him.

Returning to the back story; Mark's gospel account tells us that Herod was conflicted. He had ordered John to be imprisoned to please Herodias, his brother's wife. John had rebuked him saying: "It is not right for you to have your brother's wife". According to Mark's account, he was keeping John alive, seemingly because he feared him and respected him as a righteous and holy man. The Gospel tells us he liked to listen to him. However he had promised Herodias's daughter, in front of his birthday banquet guests - courtiers, officers and leaders of Galilee, that he would grant her anything she asked for, even half his kingdom. He could not refuse her her request for the head of John the Baptist, for he had given his word in front of his guests. Although he was grieved, he could not refuse her. Thus the deed was done. So, Herod has John the Baptist beheaded because he can.

In Richard Strauss's one act opera *Salome*, first premiered in Dresden in 1905, the text is based on Oscar Wilde's 1893 drama. During an opening banquet, John the Baptist is heard proclaiming the

coming of the Messiah from his prison cell. He is brought out for Herodias's daughter, named Salome here, to see. John repels her fascinated advances and counsels her not to follow the ways of her mother Herodias, Herod's brother's wife. John is then returned to prison while Herod asks Salome to dance. She agrees to do so provided he will grant her a wish. After her dance of the seven veils, she asks for the head of John the Baptist. The wish is duly granted. Herod is so revolted by her reaction that he orders his soldiers to crush her with their shields. Despite some genealogical confusions and contradictions and some embellishment, this storyline nonetheless retains the highly-charged atmosphere of the biblical narrative. It's a very powerful opera, if you have a chance to see it!

A few weeks ago Nigel preached on David and Goliath. In the II Samuel narrative David says to Goliath that he will strike him down and cut off his head. Once Goliath has been felled by the slingshot, David takes out his sword, kills Goliath, cuts off his head and takes it to Jerusalem. These two graphic biblical accounts have in common their ability to portray human authority and power at their most demonstrably visceral. Hence the second theme, inevitably, is decapitation as an expression of power.

As I was finalising this address ten days ago, I came across an account in the Cambridge News dated 1st July of a recent, globally significant archaeological find at Knobb's Farm, Somersham, dating back to the third century. At this Roman Britain burial site, a total of 52 bodies were found by Cambridge University's Archaeology Unit, 17 of whom had been decapitated by sword. Seven of the burials were accompanied by pottery vessels, indicating they had been given traditional burial rites and that they may have been buried by friends or relatives. It appeared the remains were of victims of legal execution. Adult males and females were equally represented, in the age range 25 to 45.

Death by institutional beheading is not uncommon, even in fairly recent British and European history. In 1587, Mary Queen of Scots was beheaded at Fotheringhay Castle in Northamptonshire (less than 50 miles from here) at the behest of her first cousin, Queen Elizabeth the First of England, on a charge of treason. In 1649 King Charles the First was publicly executed outside the Banqueting Hall of Whitehall Palace, London at the order of Parliament. Following the successful storming of the Bastille prison in Paris in 1789, the ensuing French revolution brought about thousands of deaths by public execution; many aristocrats and other enemies of the people being rapidly dispatched by the newly invented guillotine. King Louis XVI and his Queen, Marie-Antoinette, met their deaths by public execution in 1793, the monarchy having been abolished the previous year. Only as recently as September 1981 did France finally abolish capital punishment for good, the last death by guillotine being in the 1970s.

In the Japanese tradition of the Samurai, or warriors, the number of heads exhibited was a sign of the power and status of the individual. In some societies even today, beheading remains a capital punishment option.

On a lighter note, in *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, a tale largely read for children today, the Queen of Hearts shouts 'off with his head' as a sign of her irritation and displeasure.

And so, finally, to the Epistle reading. Paul powerfully reminds us in his letter of the redemptive power of God's love. Through Jesus' blood we have the promise of the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace he lavished on us. This is a mighty expression of the New Testament covenant between God and his people. As the text states: 'this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people'.

And here we have the third and final theme: the overarching connection across the millennia between the Old Testament narrative of David, his people and the ark, the ark of the covenant, and Paul's reminder of our covenanted relationship with God through Christ.

May we who are Downing Place Church, both in and beyond this renewed building, and as individuals in the workings out of our daily lives, be true to our calling and abide by our covenant with God, who is our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.