

**12th July, 2015.**

**Reading: Mark 6: 14 - 29**

**Sermon:**

Last Sunday, I asked during the sermon when we last spoke about our faith with our elder. Well, this week, during a visit, I got the chance to speak to someone in our parish about faith.

The question was asked: How can there be a God when so many bad things happen in the world? That age old question, the one that implies that if there is a God, He is cruel and unloving because He doesn't stop the evil in the world. It's a question which basically blames God for the state of the world, if there is a God.

God forbid, but if you took a child and threw him or her against a wall, how does that become God's fault? It wisnae me. It wis him. That passing of blame would never stand up in a court of law, although nowadays, I suspect that some background reports would seek to blame others for the actions of an individual.

The question is: Where does individual responsibility come in? There comes a time in life when we all know the difference between right and wrong and when we are old enough to stand our ground and make our own decisions rather than being coerced, potentially, by an adult.

If a six year old is taken by his father to commit a crime and put through a window by his father to steal something, the six year old is not to blame. The father is. If a thirty year old goes with his father to

commit a crime and goes through the window, his father is not to blame for his son's actions. The son is but the father is to blame for his own actions. How we act is ultimately our choice and no one else's.

Why do we so often blame God for everything that goes wrong? There is a war. Why God does God allow it? How about: Why did the political powers not work harder to prevent it? Why do we as individuals fuel the fire with our prejudices and our judgements?

Children are used and abused. Why does God allow it? How about: Why do adults not respect children and nurture them, care for them and protect them? Why do we not do more to show people how to love and nurture children, people who have never been loved and protected and nurtured?

So many innocent people are killed by terrorists. Why does God not stop it from happening? How about: Why do fanatics brainwash people and why do individuals not value other people's lives?

So much of what is wrong in this world is because of our behaviour as human beings. Even some, but by no means all, of the so called natural disasters result from the way we use and abuse the earth. Why does God allow it? Why do we allow it? Surely that is the question we need to examine.

In our reading today we see what can happen when people bear grudges and when people make poor choices. Background reports on the main characters in our story would have made very interesting reading but by no means excuse their actions or their lifestyle.

Herod's lifestyle left a lot to be desired as did his father's. Herod 1st, if I can call him that, had umpteen wives and a number of sons. At least three of Herod 2nd's half-brothers were murdered by his father and he himself committed adultery with, Herodias, the daughter of one of his murdered half-brothers and the wife of another of his half-brothers. That half-brother had broken Jewish Law in the first place by marrying his niece, Herodias.

Such matrimonial entanglements couldn't possibly lead to harmony. Herod and Herodius had broken all the laws of decency and morality. Salome, in dancing the way she did, was behaving like a professional prostitute. The dancing was erotic and left nothing to the imagination. The men, including Herod, were lapping it up. Herod was enjoying playing the big man, making an offer to her which was ill-thought out, actually not thought out at all, because of his drunken state.

John the Baptist lost his life because Herod was drunk and acted on impulse. I wonder how many people have lost their lives because of people acting on impulse under the influence of alcohol. I wonder how many men, how many people, perhaps, have got themselves in hot water because of playing the big man.

Alcohol causes us to lose our powers of judgement but alcohol doesn't give us an excuse for our reckless actions. We all know, including young people, that alcohol is a mind altering drug. We abuse

it at our peril. We make our choice and we live with the consequences, as Herod had to do.

John the Baptist lost his life because Herod didn't want to lose face in front of his guests by going back on his offer to Salome to give her anything she wanted. He didn't want to be thought weak by his friends. He didn't want to be laughed at but later, he bitterly regretted his actions and he was haunted by the decision he made.

How many folk, young folk in particular, get themselves into situations which, like Herod, they would rather not be in but they keep on that path to potential disaster, because they don't want to lose face among their friends and because they don't want to be mocked or thought weak?

How many of us can still be swayed to do things by peer pressure? How many of us can be swayed to have that other drink or to eat what we know we really shouldn't be eating? Those actions are different in nature from what Herod did, but they are actions which can also have consequences for us and ultimately for our families.

That foolhardy decision which was made by Herod, as Willie Barclay points out, led to Herod, having a guilty conscience. It also led to Herod being mistaken about who Jesus was because he was swayed by his guilty conscience.

He was sure that Jesus was John the Baptist back to haunt him. His problem was that he couldn't live with himself. He couldn't control his thoughts and was constantly rebuking himself for what he had

done while living in fear that his evil actions would one day catch up with him. Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist back to get even with him.

Do we have a conscience at all about how we treat other people, at times, about how we speak to other people, even those to whom we are closest? Maybe, once again, that is not on the same scale as murder or adultery but have we considered that one day we will still have to live with the memories of what we have said or done? Are we aware that we can be haunted by our words and our actions? Maybe we are already.

John the Baptist lost his life because John spoke out about Herod's adulterous relationship with Herodias and Herodias bore him a grudge. She was so bitter and twisted and no doubt, needed no reminder, certainly wanted no reminder, of her life of sin.

She wanted John silenced in the hope that she could then carry on and live in peace. Sadly, she used and abused her daughter to get what she wanted, namely John dead.

Many who are caught up in entangled relationships, will use their children to get at their partners or the children's grandparents. It is not uncommon. We only need to look at a Jeremy Kyle show to see the impact made on individuals' lives by how they live their lives. How can we blame God for our choices?

Sadly, we live in a world where some people will go to any lengths to silence their critics or those whom they feel have wronged

them. We only need to consider the gun culture to see that. Terrorist attacks are another atrocity which, to some extent, are the result of people feeling wronged and criticised and threatened. How can we blame God for our choices?

Sadly, some people also seek to use Jesus for their own ends. As everyone tried to work out who this man was, there were different verdicts given.

Herod's was first. He thought Jesus was John the Baptist back to haunt him. His was the verdict of a guilty conscience, as Willie Barclay pointed out. When we struggle and feel haunted, some might ask: How can there be a God when I feel like this? How can we blame God for the fears we face when we have a guilty conscience?

The second verdict was given by the nationalists. They believed that Jesus was Elijah back from the dead because many believed he would be the forerunner of the Messiah. As Willie Barclay says, the majority of Jews believed that the Messiah would be a conquering king who would first give the Jews back their liberty and who would then lead them on a triumphant campaign throughout the world.

That Jesus was Elijah was the verdict of a man who sought in Jesus the fulfilment of his own ambitions. The nationalists thought of Jesus, not as someone to whom they needed to submit or obey but, as someone they could use for their own ends. How can we blame God for the nationalistic ambitions of the those people?

Is it not true that nations still use God for their own ends and to justify their actions, people of every faith while others stand back and ask: How can there be a God when they see what is done in the name of religion? how can we blame God for our actions?

The third verdict given in our passage is the verdict of the man who is waiting for the voice of God through the prophet. It was believed that it had been three hundred years since God had last spoken through the prophets and so some saw Jesus as a prophet.

Jesus, however, was much more than that. As Willie Barclay says, Jesus was the very power and the very life and the very being of God.

If we want a better world, a world where people care about one another and reach out to one another and seek to protect rather than destroying one another, we need to see Jesus for who He is and take responsibility for our actions, for the things we say and for the decisions we make. If we don't, we will need to live with the consequences. We cannot blame God for all that goes wrong when we are foolish, self-indulgent, greedy, vengeful or, even, found out.

We have to reflect the love and compassion that Jesus showed, but there are times when we also need to be like John the Baptist and be willing to speak out about injustice and wrong doing for the sake of the world in which live and for the sake of the people around us. The choice, however is ours.