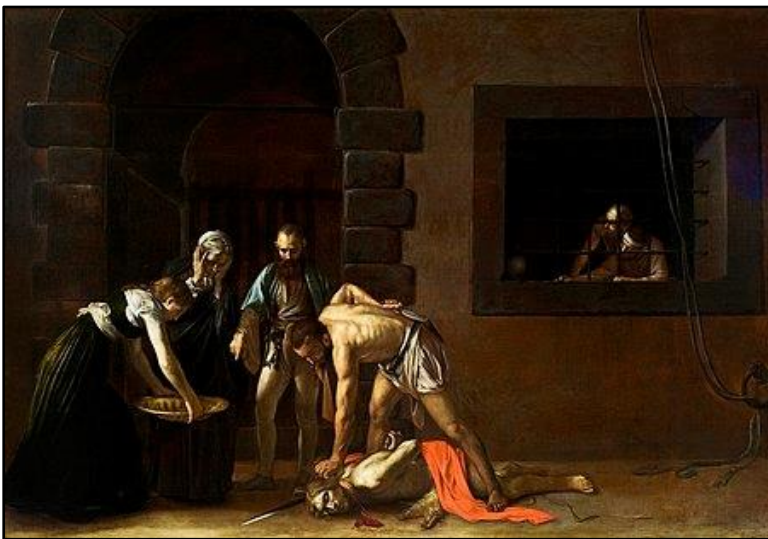


# Sermon online on Sunday 11 July 2021 by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

*Gospel: Mark 6. 14-29*

## The beheading of John the Baptist

In the National Gallery in London hangs a portrait by the Renaissance master Michaelangelo Caravaggio, called *The Beheading of John the Baptist*. It is a picture of a courtyard, painted as if the viewer has just turned a corner and seen a group of figures murdering the saint. The painting has been called one of the historical masterpieces of Western art.



And it is one of the few paintings that Caravaggio ever signed. There is a small signature, scrawled in an odd part of the canvas. After producing the greatest painting of his career, the master

took a brush and wrote his name in the blood flowing from the saint's throat: *I, Caravaggio, did this thing*. In producing a masterpiece of Renaissance art, he left a mysterious message, as if he felt somehow responsible for the death he had painted.

Over 300 years later, Oscar Wilde reads the Bible and is captivated by the melodramatic story we have just heard in this morning's gospel. His imagination sees the whole scene and he writes a play, which is promptly banned by the

authorities in London for being obscene, and for being blasphemous because it depicts Biblical figures. The play is called *Salome*, and the main character is the teenage dancer whose motives and whose mind Wilde tried to understand.

In the first production of the play, which took place in Paris, Wilde himself played the role of Salome. Like Caravaggio, he found himself so compelled by this Bible story that he placed himself inside it. And, as we've heard this morning, what a dramatic story it is.

Mark's gospel contains only two passages that are not about Jesus, instead, they are about John the Baptist. And yet, at the same time, they are also about Jesus because they reflect the effect that Jesus and his disciples were having in the region at the time. The impact of Christ's teaching is emphasised by the reaction of the regional ruler Herod and his illicit wife Herodias.

In Mark's gospel, the 12 Disciples have just returned from their first ministry, spreading the Word of God and healing people and making lives better.

The contrast between their context and King Herod's story is very significant and strengthens our perceptions of Christ. Herod sends out soldiers on a murder mission; Jesus sends out his followers to preserve life. Herod holds a self-congratulatory birthday banquet akin to a stag do, where he invites his teenage step-daughter to dance to entertain his drunken, leering friends. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is about to feed 5,000 people on a hillside so that they don't go hungry. Herod vacillates between having a fascination for John and pleasing his wife by having John beheaded. John, on the

other hand, is unmovably constant in his belief in Christ and doesn't budge from his position.

It seems to me that there are a couple of lessons to be drawn from this complex and intriguing story.

The murder of John the Baptist points us towards not a killer, but to a saviour. Not to guilt but to forgiveness. And that's very apt, because the whole of John the Baptist's life was shaped in that way – it pointed away from himself towards Jesus the Messiah. His life and his death appear in the Bible as clues to who Jesus Christ is.

Secondly, in the contrasting characters, we see that following our own impulses can lead to short-term success and entertainment, while following Christ can sometimes lead to short-term sacrifice. However, Herod (who, incidentally, was the son of Herod the Great, who the Magi met at the time of Christ's birth) was never a king, he just adopted that title and was eventually sent into exile in disgrace by the Roman authorities for making himself too self-important. 2000 years later, people still talk about John the Baptist; no-one remembers Herod.

Clearly, we have a choice in life - to be a self-seeking, self-important, self-gratifying Herod and not leaving an imprint on the world, or being a selfless promoter of righteousness and God-inspired values and leaving a lasting legacy on the people in our lives. I think I know which we would rather be.

*Thanks to Dr Jem Bloomfield for his sermon on John the Baptist preached at the parish church of St John the Baptist, Beeston, on 15 July 2018.*