**A more hideous death**

Text: Mark 6:14-29

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 53:1-3; Mark 6:14-29

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, ‘Yet not I but Christ through me’, 116, 280, ‘Behold the Lamb’, 274, 310

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#16)

**Occasion:** Lord’s Supper

**Theme:** As Herod becomes aware of the public ministry of Jesus and His disciples, some people think that Jesus is Elijah, others that He is another of the Old Testament prophets, but Herod is sure that Jesus is John the Baptist, whom he had beheaded, risen from the dead.

**Proposition:** Jesus is not John the Baptist, or Elijah or another Old Testament prophet raised from the dead, He is the Christ, the Son of God who suffered an infinitely more painful death than John the Baptist and who is raised from the dead as the Living King of The New Israel.

**Introduction**

In recent years the world has been shocked by the uploading of videos showing the hideous, gruesome deaths of people like American journalist James Foley who was beheaded by the Islamic State terrorist known as ‘Jihadi John’. The word ‘hideous’ means ‘offensive to the senses and especially to sight’. To be hideous is to be exceedingly ugly.

During my childhood growing up in England, my parents took me to the National Gallery in London on a few occasions. I was always fascinated with the 16th century Italian artist Caravaggio’s painting entitled ‘*Salome with the head of John the Baptist*’. It was ugly, hideous to see the executioner holding up John’s head above a large round flat disk held by a young woman who looks away. As I young child I had never seen a severed head before. We didn’t have the Internet, CGI or graphic violence depicted on TV back then.

Today, as we come to the historical account in Mark’s gospel upon which Caravaggio based his painting of John’s bodyless head, we learn the background to his death. We will also see that the death of Jesus Christ, which we especially remember today in the sacrament of Lord’s Supper, was more hideous than that of John. We’ll consider our text from Mark 6:14-29 under three headings:

1. A false king is wrong about the identity of Jesus
2. The hideous execution of messenger John
3. The hideous execution of King Jesus
4. **A false king is wrong about the identity of Jesus**

I’ve never said this from the pulpit before, but ‘the words at the start of our text are wrong!’ That is they are not literally true!’ I mean the words ‘**King** Herod’. This Herod was **not** a king, although he would like to have been one.

The name ‘Herod’ can be a bit confusing because there is more than one person called ‘Herod’ in Scripture. This was a name given to a number of members of the Herodian dynasty who ruled the province of Judea. Herod the Great was in power from about 37BC to 4AD. He was the Herod from whom Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt. At that time this evil man ‘*killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under*’ (Matt 2:16).

The ‘Herod’ Mark refers to in our text is one of the sons of Herod the Great, known as ‘Herod Antipas’. He was the ‘tetrarch’ of Galilee and Perea – a minor principality in the Roman Empire. This Herod was not a king. He was merely the governor, a subordinate ruler, of one of the four divisions of a province within the vast Roman Empire. The kingdom of Herod the Great had been divided between his four sons Aristobulus, Archelaus, Philip and Herod Antipas. Aristobulus’, son Herod Agrippa, became king of Judea in AD 41. His violence against the church and his sudden death is recorded in Acts 12.

Herod Antipas, the Jewish tetrarch, had modelled his court after the Roman pattern, choosing the location for his capital at Tiberias, the site of an ancient cemetery. This location effectively excluded Jewish settlers there, for to dwell where the dead were buried would render them ceremonially unclean according to Mosaic Law. It seems that Herod Antipas was all about seeking to gain favour with the ruling, occupying forces of Rome. Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar had denied him the royal title of ‘King’ that he coveted and which his ambitious wife Herodias had goaded him to request. Why then does Mark refer to him as ‘King Herod’? It could simply reflect the local custom of the time where Herod was referred to as ‘king’ or else it could be a pointed irony about this pretender to a throne.

It is very clear that Herod Antipas had an interest in Jesus. He had heard about the public ministry of Christ and His disciples. Insecure in his position, this Herod was concerned about any threat to his rule resulting from political, social or military unrest. He had also heard the various theories that were circulating about the identity of Jesus. Mark records that: ‘*Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."*’ (6:14-15).

Why would some people think that Jesus was John the Baptist brought back to life? It is helpful to know that Jesus did not begin His public ministry in Galilee until after the imprisonment of John (1:14). So, for many people who had no direct experience of John and Jesus and who were not present at Christ’s baptism, the idea that Jesus only appeared after John was dead made sense. If he was a resurrected version of John, then this could explain the extraordinary powers which they had seen that Jesus possessed.

Why would some think that Jesus was the Old Testament prophet Elijah? The Jews knew of the Old Testament predictions about Elijah coming back. Malachi had prophesied that he would return "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes*” (Mal 4:5). This is not a prediction of the reincarnation of Elijah, who never died but was taken to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Coming before the end of this age, he would be the promised ‘Messenger of the Covenant’ who would prepare the way of the Lord (Mal 3:1). Others thought that Jesus was another prophet in the succession of many who had spoken and acted for God in Israel’s history.

When Herod Antipas heard these various theories about the identity of Jesus, He thought that he knew the truth and declared: "*John, whom I beheaded, has been raised*" (Mark 6:16). Herod, possibly disturbed by an uneasy conscience, superstitiously thought that John had come back to haunt him. This false king was wrong about the identity of Jesus. Jesus **is** the Son of God, **not** John the Baptist reincarnated. In Jewish thinking, resurrection precedes judgement. So it is therefore quite plausible that there was fear in Herod’s statement about the hideous execution of John the Baptist, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The hideous execution of messenger John**

Caravaggio’s painting of ‘*Salome with the head of John the Baptist*’ was inspired by an actual event which is recorded in Scripture by both Matthew and Mark and also recounted by 1st century Jewish historian Josephus. In Josephus’ work ‘*the Antiquities of the Jews*’ (14.7.3) we learn that the name of Herodias’ daughter was ‘Salome’.

Mark, whose gospel is the shortest of the four, gives the most detailed account of the nefarious (wicked) circumstances leading up to the death of John the Baptist. Herod had captured John and put him in prison. This achieved two purposes:

1. This captivity stopped the public ministry of John which Herod felt threated by Josephus records (18.5.2) that Herod ‘*feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it in his power and inclination to raise a rebellion*’.
2. John’s captivity also protected him from Herod’s wife Herodias who, as Mark records ‘*had a grudge against him (John) and wanted to put him to death*’ (v19).

Herodias was a daughter of Aristobulus, one of the sons of Herod the Great. She was also the sister of Herod Agrippa. After marrying her half-uncle Herod Philip, Herodias left him for an adulterous relationship with his brother (another uncle) Herod Antipas. The Herodian family was complex and incestuous. We could accurately call it ‘hideous’ because evil permeated this dynasty. Herodias’ union with Herod Antipas was adulterous and shocking because the Mosaic Law clearly prohibited marriage to a brother’s wife while the brother was yet alive (Lev 18:16; 20:21). Herodias wanted John dead because he had been saying to Herod ‘*It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife*’.

John the Baptist was a courageous, faithful prophet of the Lord. Mark records that Herod ‘*feared John knowing that he was a righteous and holy man and kept him safe*’. So Herod, a weak husband like Old Testament Ahab, provided protection for John from his murderous wife. Herod listened gladly to John within his prison (Mark 6:20) - which Josephus records was in a castle in Machaerus, a fortress built by Herod the Great.

Herodias was not a woman to let fortified walls stand between her and her prey. An opportunity came when Herod gave a ‘birthday bash’ for all the local VIPs – ‘*his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee*’ (6:21). It is likely that this took place at Machaerus where John was imprisoned, rather than in Herod’s capital Tiberias in Galilee. Herodias had a daughter by her previous husband Philip. Salome danced for Herod Antipas and his guests. It must have been quite a performance, quite likely of a sexually provocative nature, because Mark records that Herod was so pleased that he said to the girl “*Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you*” vowing that she could request anything ‘*up to half my kingdom*’ (v23). Surely nobody in their right mind would make such a rash, ridiculous and reckless promise? Such was the character of the unwise would-be king Herod. His words were like Old Testament Jephthah’s tragic vow that ‘*whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord’s and I will offer it up for a burnt offering*’ (Jud 11:31).

Herod’s public oath would result in an unjust death. Under Herodias’s direction, her daughter famously asked for ‘the head of John the Baptist on a platter’. Mark records Herod’s response: “*And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother*” (Mark 6:26-28).

How hideous – the severed, bloody head of a righteous and holy man presented to an adulterous woman on a serving dish by the command of a false foolish king who lacked the courage and integrity to stand up to his wicked murderous wife. John the Baptist was a faithful servant of the Lord and yet he suffered a hideous death.

You and I brothers and sisters are certainly not John the Baptist brought back to life! But we are, like him, servants of the Lord who are preparing the way for Christ’s return as we call others to repentance and faith. We should therefore not be surprised if, and when, we suffer because of our faith. Remember that Jesus said "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it*” (Mark 8:34-35). It was Jesus who lost His life, so that people like us can have our lives saved and not suffer a hideous death like His, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The hideous execution of King Jesus**

It has been helpfully said that there are two ‘passion narratives’ (accounts of suffering and death) in the gospel of Mark; that of John the Baptist and that of Jesus Christ. The hideous execution of John points forward to the hideous execution of Jesus Christ.

As Herod knew, John was a ‘*righteous and holy man*’, although like every other descendant from Adam, not perfectly so. Jesus was not John raised from the dead, but the only perfectly righteous and holy man, the Son of God: the ‘second Adam’ (ref. Romans 5). Just as Herodias bore a grudge against John because he had exposed her sin, so not much further on in history the ‘*chief priests and the scribes would seek to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him*’ (Mark 14:1).

Just as Herodias could not execute John herself, because Herod had protected him, so the Jewish religious authorities could not execute Jesus themselves, they needed help from the Roman governor Pilate. Who, like Herod Antipas, was a weak and wicked man. John’s death came suddenly and quickly in prison when an executioner decapitated him, whereas Jesus’ death was slow and agonizing as he suffered physically before and on the cross. The words of Isaiah the prophet paint a hideous picture of Christ’s suffering and death: “*He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not*” (Isaiah 53.1-2).

Above the cross, there was a charge against Jesus “The King of the Jews” (Mark). John records that this sign ‘*was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."*’ (John 19:20-22). In God’s mysterious providence, the Roman Governor Pilate who did not know what truth is (John 18:38) accurately identified Jesus.

Whereas Herod Antipas was a false king who pretended to be what he was not, Jesus Christ truly is the King of the Jews. He is the ruler of the New Israel, the community around the world, and down through the ages who believe in Him as their Lord and Saviour. These ‘New Israelites’ are the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Gal 3:29) whose faith was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6).

Jesus is not John the Baptist, or Elijah or another Old Testament prophet raised from the dead, He is the Christ, the Son of God who suffered an infinitely more painful death than John the Baptist and who is raised from the dead as The Living King of the new Israel.

Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you believe that He died a hideous, unjust, death in your place? Do you proclaim Him as the true King over you, submitting to Him in all things? If you do, then you have been spared a hideous death forever in Hell, the realm of separation from all the good, peace and joy that is the essence of the Living God in harmonious relationship with His people.

Perhaps the most hideous aspect to the death of Christ is His own separation from God the Father on the cross. We cannot fully comprehend the agony, the pain and anguish of this as the full weight of God’s wrath fell upon His own beloved son whom He had made to be sin as He carried the iniquities of others. The anguished cry of Jesus as He experienced abandonment by His Heavenly Father – ‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*’ – reveals the hideous, ugly reality of our sin, brothers and sisters before our Holy, righteous God.

As we celebrate and observe the sacrament of Lord’s Supper today, we remember the hideous execution of Jesus Christ and proclaim His death until He comes again. We give thanks knowing that because Jesus willingly became ugly – (He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us) so that Christ bore the hideous sins of many, before the pure face of God the Father. We brothers and sisters are now seen by God as beautiful, resplendently clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

“*He was pierced for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities; and to bring us peace he was punished, and by his stripes we are healed*” (hymn 280 v1).

AMEN.