

2 Samuel 7:1-14a  
Mark 6:14-21

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## REMEMBERING WHO YOU ARE

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." *Mark 6:14*

To rightly interpret our story about John the Baptist and the court of Herod the king we also have to understand what preceded it. This isn't unusual. All through Scripture virtually every passage of Scripture works in tandem with the one next to it. As the eminent Rabbi Akiba, a near contemporary of Jesus, wrote, "Every section of scripture is explained by the one that stands next to it."

In the preceding story Jesus dispatches his disciples to the towns and villages of the region to preach the kingdom of God. He cautions them "take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in [your] belts" (Mark 6:8). They are not to wear out their welcome, or shift among homes in one town to benefit from hospitality. And if their gospel of repentance and personal reform is unwelcome, they are to shake off the dust from their feet and depart for the next village. In short, they are to live in absolute trust and dependence on God.

Once they are gone—and they would be gone for some time—Mark brilliantly suspends time by changing the setting to the opposite extreme. He takes us into the other kingdom, Herod's court, where overindulgence, scheming self concern and deceit are the order of the day. Herod had John the Baptist, the herald and precursor of Jesus' ministry, beheaded. But the message of the Baptist has taken flight among Jesus' disciples, and is spreading. Now, in a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death and resurrection, rumors circulate that John is alive again. It sends tremors through the court. Like a fire in a dying forest, it cannot be contained. Two kingdoms stand over against each other, one living by brutality, terror, and economic chains, the other by compassion, love, and hospitality, and the latter is growing.

If you can imagine the infamous Boss Tweed, the corrupt and scheming "king" of New York's Tammany Hall gang after the Civil War, that was King Herod the Great and his entourage during Jesus' early years. His four sons were hardly much better. They were puppet kings who ruled Judea (modern day Israel/Palestine) at the whim of Rome. Herod the Great did not inherit royal status but aspired to it from unimpressive roots, then held it by political stealth, meanness, and villainy, like Boss Tweed. The Herods built impressive cities on the backs of landless poor and their tribute. They included Tiberius beside Lake Galilee, and Sephoris, an impressive jewel which became the new capitol of Galilee. Sephoris sprawled just four miles from northwest of Nazareth, and bathed in early morning light it was plainly in view of Jesus' home in the tiny hamlet of Nazareth.

One of the enduring oddities of the New Testament is that Sephoris is nowhere ever mentioned. Yet it must have figured prominently in Jesus' life. The Herod of Jesus' adulthood, Herod Antipas, for years hired skilled craftsmen from all over Galilee to build his new palace, 3,000 seat theatre, and a host of costly civic buildings there. As an artisan himself, it is hard to imagine Jesus not working there, just an hour away from home, over the fifteen or so years before he began his ministry around age thirty. Tiny Nazareth alone could never have supported his trade. The contrast between the two could hardly be more striking.

In a sermon a few years ago called "Joanna and Manaen" we saw a connection between Jesus and two very highly placed members of the royal court of Herod Antipas. One was Joanna, the wife of Herod's Chief Steward, essentially his prime minister. Luke tells us that Jesus healed Joanna of a debilitating disease, and

thereafter she became a constant companion and benefactor among the traveling band of disciples. The other follower, Manaen, was adopted into the royal court as a child companion for the young Antipas, and is named in Acts as an early follower of Jesus (Acts 13). Then there were two influential, highly placed members of the Jewish parliament, the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who took care of Jesus burial at no small personal risk and great expense.

Jesus clearly did not reject the one material kingdom in favor of the other, so much as he sought to transform the one to the principles of the other. He knew how beguiling the kingdoms of this world can be, yet how ultimately hollow and pernicious they are because they consume such energy, time, commitment, and moral vulnerability to sustain them.

When a material kingdom becomes its own end, it buys for us—nothing. Because the world can sell me a house but it cannot purchase for me a home.

“Peace?” says the world, “Well, sir, I can sell you a superb home alarm system, or my brother in law can sell you an exotic Caribbean vacation. But peace, well, no, I’m sorry, sir, but I cannot sell you any peace.”

“Love? No, sir, I’m afraid we aren’t able to sell you any love. But I could provide you with a companion for the night.”

“Happiness? No, ma’am. Regrettably, that’s not in our inventory. But I could sell you any number of diversions to fill your time.”

These are the things of the kingdom that we crave. They are given to us when the heart is right.

Bishop Willimon writes,

The world is dangerous only if we allow the world to [shape and define] who we are. If we do not know who we are, the world will give us a name and a place. If we do not know our commission as God’s people, the world will give us direction. If we are not a part of the movement announced by John, embodied by Jesus, and embraced by many, the world will overwhelm us.”

It will ensnare us, relegating and postponing to a dreamy hope the peace we really seek. Even religion, ultimately becomes little more than an emblem of moral self-justification, or a thing to disdain, a popular thing to disparage. Or the goals of the kingdom of God become convenient humanitarian ornaments, shorn of commitment. *Remember who you are, and whose you are.*

Ron Sider, who teaches at nearby Palmer Seminary (formerly Eastern Seminary), writes:

Is Jesus Lord of the boardroom as well as the bedroom? Is Jesus Lord of the Congress as much as of the Church? Does Jesus care as much about how you vote as how you pray? As much about how you work as how you worship? As much about public life as private life?

William Wilberforce thought so.

Sider goes on to note that as a wealthy young aristocrat in the eighteenth-century, Wilberforce lived a rather wild and immoral life. Then, following a powerful conversion experience at a Wesley revival, Wilberforce forsook sexual immorality and entered—politics! That’s right, *politics!* God called Wilberforce as a new Christian to a political career. He ran for parliament, and for almost forty years led the crusade against slavery in the British House of Commons.

Politics, to be sure, were not Wilberforce’s only passion. He became actively engaged in evangelism. One of his most important books was a plea to the British upper class to become committed Christians. He was a friend to and actively promoted mission work around the world.

Wilberforce’s primary call as an evangelical was, however, politics. He believed with a passion that God had led him to political power and influence to end the ghastly evils of the slave trade and slavery.

Over the years, untold millions of “pagan” Africans died, were raped, starved, tortured, thrown to sharks—alive, sick, or dead on the way to the brave new world of the “Christian” Americas. A “lucky” 5 – 10 million survived the crossing, endured the whip and were bred like animals.

In 1787, when Wilberforce began his crusade, the ships of “Christian” Europe carried 100,000 captive Africans each year to America. Wilberforce was the leading advocate of these dispossessed, because British

ships carried fully half the human cargo, shackled between decks four feet high, chained together with considerably less room than the 28 inches allowed seamen of the day to sling their hammocks below deck. Those who objected to the end of the slave trade cited that it would devastate the nation's economy.

Wilberforce knew that the slave trade was an affront to love of God and neighbor, even though almost all respectable people of the day quietly accepted the prevailing view that slaves were as legitimate pieces of property as coal and cattle, which they would never have treated so harshly.

He prayed and lobbied. In fact his small circle of friends regularly prayed three hours each day for all their tasks, including slavery and the abolition of the slave trade. He was a brilliant political organizer. He had to be because his opponents insisted that the abolition of slavery would devastate the British economy. Wilberforce's response was unflinching: personal ethics matter more than money or profit.

After a twenty year struggle the British parliament finally abolished its participation in the slave trade in 1807. Twenty-six years later, in the year that William Wilberforce died, the British government abolished slavery itself throughout its empire. Slowly, over the next century, the rest of the world did the same.

Wilberforce was the central player toward the moment that changed world history. He did it all because of his devotion to Christ. He knew that Jesus was the Lord of life—all life, political, economic, the human family, moral values, everything.

He remembered who he was, and whose he was.

Amen.