

Getting out of the grandstand

CTK Eucharist
Sunday 11th July 2021
Paul Day

Mark 6:14-29
Amos 7:7-15
Romans 12:4-8

Last week our gospel reading was the passage immediately before today's reading – the somewhat gruesome tale of the beheading of John the Baptist. And on the face of it, it could hardly be more different.

Last week we heard about the first disciples and how they were transformed from being just followers of Jesus to those who were sent out in his name. Sent out in pairs to heal people and to proclaim the good news of Jesus to all who would listen. And we reflected on this change from being spectators to participants, and we began to think about how it might apply to us. We talked about being on the threshold of a new season. Lots of things are, or will shortly be, starting up – either again, or for the first time. And everyone who considers themselves to be part of God's community, God's church, God's family here in Shirley Parish has a part to play in that.

So what has today's gospel reading got to do with this?

Well in a sense King Herod (this is Herod Antipas – the son of the ruthless Herod of the Christmas stories, but evidently just as ruthless) – Herod was an interested observer of John the Baptist. We heard that Herod *"Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him"*

Clearly there was something about John that intrigued Herod. But couldn't quite bring himself to act on what he heard.

Maybe his wife and family weren't interested, and he didn't want to inconvenience them. Maybe he recognised that he needed to change the way he was living his life, but was too addicted to it to be able to let go.

Maybe he was afraid of the consequences of doing so.

Whatever it was, he was somehow intrigued by John and his message.

Maybe it made him feel a bit better about himself. Looked as if he was taking God seriously. Helped him to think that he was actually not such a bad guy after all. But without any intention of allowing what he heard to actually impact on his life.

Maybe he actually regarded John's life-changing and life-saving message as, well, entertainment.

But God actually demands more of us. Not just watching from a safe distance, but committing ourselves. Committing ourselves not just to following, but to being prepared to be changed, to put ourselves on the line in some way. Being prepared to be sent.

That's a thought that we can pick up from the section of Paul's letter to the Romans that we heard this morning where Paul writes *present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

In other words – your worship is not just about attending church and observing things – its about all of your life. Its about all that you are and all that you do. Its about total commitment. Its about offering everything to God.

God doesn't want spectators – he wants us to get out of the grandstand seats and get onto the playing field.

Like Amos did. In that Old Testament reading we heard about Amos. This was around 750 years before the time of Jesus. After the great Kings David and Solomon, the nation of Israel had split into two "nations". Israel in the North, centred around a place called Bethel and Judah in the South based around Jerusalem.

Amos lived in Judah. He was a shepherd. He wasn't a priest or a religious leader. He was an ordinary guy. Perhaps the equivalent today would be a car mechanic or a landscape gardener. Just an ordinary guy. And yet he was committed to God. He was not prepared just to be an observer – he was willing to step out and do what needed to be done.

And God called him – a Southerner – to go to the North and tell them they should mend their ways or else disaster would come. But, unsurprisingly, they didn't change and, unsurprisingly, disaster came. The nation was defeated in battle and the people taken into exile. But that's a story for a different day.

So what are we saying this morning?

That God wants commitment. He asks us to be ready not just to watch but to take part.

For Amos that meant going North. For the disciples we heard about last week it meant going out among the villages and towns. For Peter it meant leaving his home and livelihood; for Paul it meant going all over the Middle East preaching about Jesus. And we might simply say "I couldn't do that!!"

But that's not the whole story. For many in the Bible being committed, being a participant, being on the playing field just meant staying where they were and getting involved there.

There is a story just a couple of chapters earlier in Mark's gospel which tells of Jesus healing a demon possessed man (we would most likely say today that he had a mental illness). He wanted to go with Jesus, but Jesus told him to stay where he was and speak to people about him there.

You probably remember too the story of Mary and Martha where Jesus commended Mary for sitting still and listening to him.

There's a story in Acts of a rich woman called Lydia who offered hospitality to Paul and his companions in Philippi. Her commitment was not shown by going anywhere but by offering her home as a place where the new Christians could meet.

So being sent out may not mean being sent anywhere, but being ready to offer ourselves in a new way to God.

And we all have things we can offer. The reading from Romans goes on to talk about various gifts that God gives to people. Gifts not to hang on to or hide, but to use. Yes, some of the gifts might seem quite daunting, but there are many I am sure we can easily relate to. *encouragement, generous giving, showing compassion.*

Sometimes the greatest gift we can offer is just to 'turn up'. To come to the new Welcome Café when it opens and be ready to talk to people. Maybe volunteer with Jimmy Tots - not as a leader, but as someone who will sit and have a coffee, and make others welcome. Chat to people who maybe we don't know yet. Just be friendly. For by being friendly, we are showing something of the character of God – maybe to someone who doesn't really even know about God at all yet.

The number of new care homes and residential homes in the parish cannot have escaped anyone's attention. We are looking at ways of how we can share the good news of the Gospel and the love of God with residents in these homes. Yes, we can have regular services in them as we have done before, but wouldn't it be better if each care home or residential home had someone from the church who could just pop in every fortnight or so and talk to the residents. Making friends, and quietly sharing the love of God. Then, when we come to hold a monthly service that person could encourage the people they already know to come along. Maybe you could be that person. Just a case of being friendly and committing yourself. Getting out of the stands onto the pitch.

So it doesn't have to be big things. It is simply offering who we are and what we have to God for him to use. We can all do this. We are never too old, too infirm, too anything not to be able to offer our gifts in God's service. Yes, our circumstances may change, but we always always have something we can offer to God in the service of others. Even if we are not as mobile as we once were. Even if we are housebound. Making things. Phoning others to encourage them. Praying. There is always something

Maybe we find it hard to see what we can offer. Perhaps then it might be good to talk to someone about it. Please have a word with me, with one of the wardens, or the Readers or

anyone you feel comfortable talking to. Sometimes we can only see what God wants us to do when we talk to others. But please don't remain in the grandstand.