

A popularity contest - Mark 6: 14-29

May the words I speak be those You want spoken,
may the words we hear be those You want heard,
may our hearts be willing to change .

Amen

How many use social media? It's been a great way to keep in touch during the pandemic when we could not meet in person.

There is another side to social media, that is not so positive.

Many of you know my daughter Esther. She is a millennial, born in year 2000, now she is 20 years old. Recently she was very excited to tell me she has over 1000 followers on Instagram.

I was astounded – how can you possibly keep in touch with 1000 people?

She laughed at this question and explained that's not the point, it's about sharing the best bits of your life with people – “everyone wants to look good” she said.

Facebook launched in 2004 and today there are around 3 billion users worldwide – the global population is 7 and a half billion – approaching half the planet is using Facebook.

In 2009, Facebook introduced the like button, and since then, everything someone posts can be rewarded by those who read it with a thumbs up, or a 'like'.

Conversation has become a popularity contest.

Esther says everybody is bothered by likes and can get feelings of insecurity if you don't get them – “but when you get to my age you grow out of that, it's all fake anyway”, she said.

Well, if I'm honest I'd be a bit disappointed if no one gave me a thumbs up when I share something.

As we see from our bible reading the desire to look good in front of peers and basing our security on likes has dire consequences for Herod and those around him – just as they might for any of us today.

Let's look at the passage.

King Herod hears stories of someone performing miracles - Who can this be?

He assumes this person must be John the Baptist – “the man I beheaded who has raised from the dead”.

Then we have a flashback account of why Herod had John executed.

Two important things to know about Herod:

1. He was in power because it suited the Romans so keeping in with the military commanders and high officials, the people he invited to his birthday party, was an important part of protecting his own position.
2. Herod was first married to someone called Phasaelis. His brother Philip was married to Herodias. However, Herod and Herodias decided to leave their spouses to marry each other.

John told Herod this second marriage was not lawful. John knew Herod wanted the Jews to recognise him as their true King and he was very clear - the coming Messiah is someone very different to you, Herod, and certainly not someone who took his brother's wife.

This was not what Herod wanted to hear and yet somehow, he knew there was truth in what John said – perhaps you know that feeling, when someone gives you feedback that you would prefer to dismiss but recognise there is some truth in it...

When I worked in an office someone said people found me a bit scary – me! No, surely not - so I had to have more conversations to understand the root of that feedback.

For Herod there was something compelling about John's message, but it was just a bit too inconvenient. So rather than get rid of him altogether, he put John in prison to shut him up.

And what about Herodias: She knew if Herod chose to listen to John, Herod would leave her, and she would lose her power. She set out to get what she wanted no matter who got hurt along the way including her first husband, her second husband, her daughter.

Herod threw a big party to celebrate his birthday and invited all the local dignitaries. He lined up the entertainment – his step-daughter came in to dance. When she finished Herod offered to give her anything she wanted – it's easy to imagine the guests cheering along, clinking their wine goblets.

“Ask me anything you want, and I'll give it to you ... up to half my kingdom!”

Seems a bit rash, but perhaps his stepdaughter wants jewels or a new palace.

She went out to ask her mother: “What shall I ask for?”

Picture the scene as she came back to the banquet - What would she ask for? The guests listened carefully...

“I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

This was not what anyone expected, and Herod was distressed...but everyone had heard his promise. If he backed down in front of these dignitaries, he would lose face. He really wanted to stay popular with these people. Easier to send an executioner to do the deed – and back to the party.

When my niece and nephew were very small William pinched his sister Gwen who was 4 at the time, she looked at him and said “William, there’ll be consequences”. Wise words for a 4 year old.

The consequence for John the Baptist, because he lived his life pointing people to Jesus and was willing to speak up, was a terrible death.

While we trust God for the spiritual blessings that Paul talks about in Ephesians, we know there is a cost to our obedience.

We are all faced with choices every day that give us the chance to speak up or to sacrifice a bit of ourselves rather than feed our need for popularity and likes.

When Bill and Christine volunteer as hospital chaplains or the Jackson family collects for the food bank or Lucy sews 50 wash bags for shoe boxes or Laxmi learns how to crochet so she can pass on this skill to local women they are choosing to give their time and use their gifts to help others. God loves this.

If we go back to the beginning of the passage, remember people were questioning, Who is this performing miracles?

Herod didn’t know the man he assumed was John the Baptist raised from the dead was actually Jesus.

We know. And we know that the final outcome. Like John, Jesus was sentenced to death by another man seeking to please a crowd. God raised Jesus from the dead and through him we are all offered forgiveness and a place in God’s long term plan.

Paul says we are sealed by the Holy Spirit with a promise of heaven. This is our real source of security. This is where I can draw confidence and reassurance when I don’t get enough Facebook likes.

A prayer for us all - Let us not seek to please the crowd, the popularity contest is all fake any way; God offers us a place in his long term plan if we choose to please him instead.

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