

Sermon for Sixth Sunday of Pentecost, July 12, 2009
2 Samuel 6:1-5,12b-19; Psalm 24, Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29
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In this passage from the gospel of Mark we are once again confronted, by the image of and the belief in reincarnation. The majority of Christians do not like talking about reincarnation and tend to dismiss it as a “Hindu belief” and ignore that the gospel writers had no problem raising it.

When Jesus asked the disciples “Who do people say that I am?” They did not reply, “Oh, some think you’re off our rocker” or “Some think you’re a loose cannon going round the country preaching.” No. They were quite clear, “Some think you’re Elijah. Others think you are John the Baptist.” Jesus, or the author of the Good New, did become involved in this discussion. Instead it was dropped in favor of a totally different topic; the divinity of Jesus.

In this morning’s gospel we have two issues. One of reincarnation which is secondary to the issue of speaking truth to power. The issue of reincarnation is raised by King Herod. Keep in mind that Herod was not a king in the same sense as his father, Herod the Great who ruled at the time of Jesus’ birth. Herod the Great did not want to leave his kingdom to his son Herod, so he instead divided it among his sons and the smallest portion was given to Herod. While he had the title of King, the *de facto* ruler was Pilate. Herod is sometimes referred to as the *tetrarch*, meaning he was ruler of a quarter. In other words, a quarter of his father’s kingdom. Herod’s region was probably not much larger than most counties in a state. It is also worth keeping in mind that Herod’s family were not really Jews. They were wealthy Edomites who were forced to become Jews shortly before the birth of Jesus.

Herod heard of Jesus and his disciples and all that Jesus and his disciples were doing. In his inquires as to who this Jesus of Nazareth was he was told that “*Some were saying, John the baptizer has been raised from the dead and for this reason these powers are in him.*” *But others said “It is Elijah” and still others thought he was one of the prophets of old.*” But when Herod heard of it he said that Jesus was “*John, whom I beheaded.*”

What is interesting is the reference to Elijah. In the first book of Kings it is Elijah who speaks truth to King Ahab. The first sixteen chapters of 1 Kings show that Yahweh, through the prophets, is in charge of history rather than the kings or the other Gods whom the kings choose to worship. Everything the prophets say comes to pass. However, at the end of Chapter sixteen Ahab begins to reign over Israel and it is reported that Ahab *did more evil in the sight of the Lord than all who went before him*. He took as his wife Jezebel, daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians and then began to serve the god Baal. He built a house for the God Baal and built an altar for Baal in the house. 1 Kings goes on to say that Ahab *did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him*.

Two miracles are then recorded. One where Elijah asked a woman for a morsel of bread and she told him she was going to bake a cake and then go home to die as that was the last of her food. But Elijah convinced her to bake a cake for him and that her oil and meal would never be empty till the rains came again. Then the woman's son took ill and died and Elijah brought him back to life.

The story goes on to point out that Ahab had been looking for Elijah to kill him and he was being told that Elijah could not be found. When Ahab finally met Elijah he called him *a troublemaker of Israel*. But Elijah, speaking truth to power, replied that it was Ahab who was the troublemaker. Elijah ordered that all the Baal prophets meet with him at Mount Carmel where he had two bulls killed. The Baal prophets killed one and put it on the wood and Elijah killed the other and put it on the wood but they did not light the wood. The Baal prophets called to Baal to set the wood on fire and nothing happened. Elijah mocked them saying *Baal is either meditating or has gone for a walk, perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened*.

Then Elijah prepared the bull he had chosen, had the people fill the trench with water and then called on Yahweh: *"The fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, the dust and the water that was in the trench*. Elijah told the people to kill the Baal prophets. When Jezebel heard of this she sent a message to

Elijah saying “*So may the gods do to me and more also if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.* And Elijah had to run away to save his life.

In the next chapter we read where Naboth refused to give his vineyard to Ahab. When Jezebel heard this she had Naboth falsely convicted of cursing God and he was stoned to death and then she told Ahab, now that Naboth is dead you can take his vineyard. Elijah came and again, spoke truth to power. This time Ahab repented, and did penance for all that happened

So, here we have a prophet who spoke for God, brought an end to the drought and raised a dead child. John the Baptist came out of the wilderness calling on the people to repent for their sins and called the leadership in Jerusalem *a brood of vipers*. John had no problem speaking truth to power.

John did not tell Herod something he did not already know. Herod knew it was wrong of him to marry Philip's wife. This was clear from the book of Leviticus that a man should or could not marry his brother's wife. But she was not only his brother's wife, she was also his niece. Herod divorced his first wife in order to marry Phillip's wife and she divorced Phillip to marry Herod. Keep in mind that, divorce laws aside, marriage was for the most part, a political issue especially for those in power. The attitude of Herod and Herodias toward John were not unlike that of Ahab and Jezebel. It was Jezebel who hated Elijah and it was Herodias who wanted John killed. It seems that Herod liked John and liked to listen to him but when John spoke truth to power Herod, unlike Ahab who confessed and did penance, had John put in prison.

There seems to be no doubt that Herod did not wish to behead John but Herodias wanted John dead. She got her opportunity when Herod threw a birthday party for himself and invited a number of his influential friends. His daughter, Salome, danced for them and he was so pleased he not only told her he'd give her what ever she wanted, he swore an oath he'd give her half his kingdom if she wanted it.

When she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter Herod was shocked. He did not expect this and he could have refused. We can say that he should have told her that that was murder and he could not do it. Rather, he was embarrassed in

front of all his friends he had sworn an oath to give her what she requested and, disgusting as it was to him, he kept his word. John was beheaded and his disciples took his body and buried him.

In speaking truth to power, Elijah had to run for his life. Later on, when speaking truth to power, Elijah experienced a king willing to put on sackcloth and ashes and do penance for his action.

In speaking truth to power, John found himself in the sights of the leaders of the Temple, the same ones who later on would have Jesus crucified. In speaking truth to power, John was beheaded.

When speaking truth to power, everyone is changed. Those who hear it know it is truth and do not like it. Some choose to leave one denomination for another. Others leave one church for another. Some cease going to church altogether.

Priests in Belfast were shot at and some have in fact been killed. Many were just threatened. During the Vietnam war and the Civil Rights marches, many who spoke truth to power found themselves in jail, abused, their homes burned, threatened with loss of life, and some were killed.

What Herod, Pilate and Ahab had in common was the power of control. Pilate told Jesus *Do you not know I have to the power to free you or to crucify you?"* and Jesus replied, *You would not have that power if it were not given you from above.* It is reported that, from that point on, Pilate tried to release Jesus. Pilate heard truth being spoken to power. Pilate had the legal power, the power of control to execute or release.

What Elijah, John and Jesus had in common was their powerlessness. They had no power but the power of the truth of what they spoke. Those who had the power of control knew that these men spoke a moral truth and they had the choice to listen to them or refuse to listen to them.

Speaking truth to power is never an easy exercise. It is always risky. One is never sure what the outcome is going to be. Elijah did not expect Ahab to repent. Jonah did not expect the King of Nineveh and the people there to repent. For the ability to speak truth to power let us pray:

“O God by whom the meek are guided in judgment and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us do, that the Spirit of Wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble, through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen. “ (BCP 832)