

Concessions to convenience: Mark 6:14-29

by [George C. Heider](#) in the [June 30, 2009](#) issue

The memory still fills me with shame. I was a junior in high school, and had joined the small group of guys that I usually ate lunch with in the cafeteria. Over the past few weeks we'd been increasingly drawn together by our shared Christian faith (a discovery made when I lent one of them a book in which I had a communion registration card from my church: he wanted to know if I truly believed the "real presence" language on the card). On this particular day, the same fellow invited me to join him in praying a blessing over the meal. I started to bow my head, then looked up into the blank eyes of a student who was not part of the group. I declined to pray.

We can all dredge up such guilty flashbacks. The one related above might have come to my mind if the Sunday lection were Peter's denial of Jesus. But my memories were stirred not by Peter but by Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, making his cameo appearance in the Gospel according to Mark.

Our tendency is to more or less excuse Herod as the overly proud, seduced, entrapped or otherwise "had" husband of Herodias. Yet we must grant that she had at least been taking seriously the imprecations of John the Baptizer against her marriage to her former husband's brother. Herod comes across as at best oblivious, and at worst duplicitous. But at the end of the day he still gave the orders.

The best witness against Herod is Herod himself. The entire account of John's murder follows on his admission that he suspects the newly famous Galilean preacher Jesus to be John redivivus. The story of the execution then represents a rare biblical specimen of flashback. Herod recalls all too well how he accommodated his wife's wrath against John by arresting him, but that he then protected John and enjoyed listening to him—although he found the prophet disturbing, or perhaps confusing (*apore*). Then Herod had John killed, pleading that he, Herod, could not do otherwise given his station and the situation—you'd have to be a king to understand.

Actually we understand all too well. We've never had someone put to death for reasons of state or social convenience, but then we've never had the chance or need

to. Our concessions to convenience and convention come in different shapes. What we share with Herod is a willingness to cut our losses and walk away from what we know to be right when one who is other becomes a problem. Our ears stop working, as does our mind, and we simply leave.

The larger message becomes clear when we look at it in the text's context within Mark's Gospel. Bracketing the entire account are Jesus' sending forth of his disciples and his receiving them back again. The intervening account warns the would-be disciple against acts of convenient conscience (read from Herod's perspective) and against surprise that one may be betrayed and even killed just when one is making progress in "speaking truth to power" (read from John's side). From both points of view, the larger import depends on our answer to the question: Who is Jesus? Interestingly, the same questions are still in circulation two chapters later. When Jesus asks his disciples for a report on popular perceptions of his identity, Peter reaches outside Herod's "John" and others' answers of "Elijah" and "one of the prophets" to the response that would finally provide both courage under challenge and freedom beyond guilt: "You are the Messiah." An attentive disciple could have figured this out by listening closely to John the Baptizer. But in any event it is a new answer—an answer from outside the conventional wisdom—that finally breaks the vicious cycle of failure and self-recrimination.

"Life goes on," we like to say when we're trying to get past a particularly awful moment. So it is for the disciple who looks to Mark's Gospel as guide. The flashback recalls that John's disciples had done the right thing by their master when they placed him in a tomb. Then we return to present time. No sooner have Jesus' apostles reunited and headed off for a respite from their labors than human demand encroaches on them once again (6:30-33). Jesus responds with sustenance for all, with a marvel that signals victory over evil and with healing that says the same. All of this precedes the disciples' truly knowing whom they are following, but to their credit they keep putting one foot in front of the other—literally, faith seeking understanding—despite both dangers and failures along the way. At the last, others of Jesus' disciples will echo John's disciples' final act of devotion by caring for their Master's brutalized corpse.

Sometimes "keeping on keeping on" is the best we can do, at least until (as one of my teachers said) "the light dawns and the penny drops," and something or someone from outside of our perceived reality breaks in and catches our ear and moves our mind and heart.