

"CONFRONTING THE CONSCIENCE"

INTRODUCTION The sermon this morning is about a murder. The victim is a man whose name was John. The culprit is a king whose name was Herod. Most of you, I'm sure, are familiar with the scene. It's been reenacted many times on the stage, in opera, and in novels. It needs to be described to you only in the briefest terms.

THE SETTING The murder took place on King Herod's birthday. He was celebrating the day by having a great banquet in his palace, and to it, as you might expect, were invited all of the members of his court, the top ranking officers of the army, and the leading members of the province. Even in these sedate United States, people often do things on such occasions that they might not so readily do at other times, and it's not surprising to us that one of the invited guests did do something rather unusual. In this case, it was King Herod's niece whose name was Salome. She danced for the entire assembled crowd. The king was inflamed with delight, and in the emotional excitement of the moment, he made a rather extravagant promise. He promised to give this girl anything she asked for. Now she did what most girls under the circumstances would have done. She consulted her mother. Her mother was not so good a mother as some girls have, and she suggested that she ask for the head of John the Baptist. This she did, and this she got, and the head of John the Baptist was brought into the dining hall on a silver platter.

The account of this murder is somewhat different from the ones that we often read about in our newspapers in that no attempt was made to conceal it. No investigation was made. No detective work was needed for there was nothing to detect. No one was brought to trial because kings in those days were not brought to trial. But the cruelty and the brutality were the same. Cruelty often creeps into the corners of life and into the most unexpected places, and it goes without saying that it can creep into the corners of life today just as easily as it did two thousand years ago in the palace of King Herod.

THE CHARACTERS Before we go on with the story in order to probe it, and to see what light it throws on some of the problems that you and I are often confronted with, suppose that we take a moment or two to discuss the two main characters of this incident.

Let's begin with Herod. You'll recall that Herod was the son of King Herod the Great. His father, Herod the Great, was a cruel and crafty king, filled with many tricks and traits. He often murdered anyone who stood in his way, including one of his own wives, and several of his own children. Young Herod was raised in a home that was dominated by this kind of person. Hovering over the palace in which he lived was an atmosphere of political intrigue and moral decadence. His home environment was decidedly against him, and this I think, is a factor that would be noted today in any case study of a murder. Added to this is the fact that Herod inherited some of his father's tricks and traits. To be sure, this was only natural. All of us have inherited the strengths and weaknesses of our parents. To be more specific, young Herod on one occasion took his living brother's wife, and made her his own wife. Her name was Herodias. There were many repercussions of this deed, and upon it hangs this entire story. In order to do this, Herod had to set to one side a perfectly good wife who

happened to be the daughter of the King of Arabia. Naturally this got Herod into trouble with the King of Arabia. And so the picture that we have of King Herod is the picture of a rather complicated person, a person who in spite of the material advantages of his home life did not have the advantage of a good home, good stock and good inheritance. He was a person who had come to a place of power without any of the equipment which was necessary to use that power wisely.

But now looking at the other person involved in this incident, namely John, we find that he presents quite a contrast to King Herod. John was the son of a priest. He was raised in the atmosphere of the temple, and in the atmosphere of personal piety. He knew nothing of the elaborate entanglements of court life. He had never been exposed to the sensational experiences which surrounded the palace way of life. It was all strange and foreign to him. But the scriptures were not foreign to John. He was familiar with the temple services. His piety was in sharp contrast to the pomp of Herod's palace. And this too, John outran his father, for where his father was a priest, John became a prophet. In other words, he was one of those rare individuals who from time to time appear on the horizon of the world and speak for God. He was one of those person who would stand at the cross roads of life and say "This is right or this is wrong because God says so!" And strangely enough the people were attracted by him and went out to listen to him. They were attracted by the austerity of his life, and by the truth that he spoke in piercing penetrating words, words that went to the very heart of many of their cherished privacies.

BACK TO THE STORY There stand these two men. These two men, strangely apart, so vividly contrasted with each other, were eventually brought together. And this is how it all happened.

Several minutes ago I referred to the fact that Herod took his living brother's wife. This created something of a scandal as you can well imagine. Some of the people, perhaps the people in the palace, were ready to overlook it, but there were others who were not quite so ready to pass it all by. Sometimes the masses of people can be sensitive to right and wrong in a way that you and I do not often give them credit. We saw it happen a couple of years ago in Great Britain, and we may see something like this happen in this country before we're through. But at any rate, the masses of people living in Galilee, and in Jerusalem knew there was something wrong in the way that Herod had taken his brother's wife, and it was John who put their feelings into words when he stood before Herod in his palace and said with great courage: "It is wrong for you to possess your brother's wife."

Of course it was only natural that when Herodias heard this she wanted John killed. Nothing else would satisfy her, but Herod refused to kill John. He tried to satisfy Herodias by having John cast into prison. He hesitated to kill him. We pause and wonder why he refused to kill John. After all, Herod was used to killing people who stood in his way and annoyed him, why not John? I suppose that part of the reason rested in the fact that he respected John. Perhaps he saw in John something that he wished he had. It may have been John's honesty, and integrity, his straightforwardness that appealed to Herod. At any rate, he evidently respected and admired John. When Herod listened to John, he was much perplexed and yet he heard him gladly. Perplexed and disturbed, and yet he enjoyed listening to him. Rather strange and

unusual, and yet when you stop to think about, we've had similar experiences. We've been disturbed by things a speaker has said, and yet we go back and hear him again, and like Herod, we hear him gladly. Disturbed and yet drawn to him. I suppose it was his conscience that was stirring him. It must have been his conscience that pointed him upwards. Sometimes we're apt to think of conscience only in negative terms, as that little indescribable something that stings us when we've done something wrong. But conscience, I think, also has this positive side. It has the power to draw you towards something better. It's our capacity to recognize, and respond to something greater than ourselves and higher than ourselves, as well as our tormentor when we refuse to do something.

How Herod reminds us of ourselves. We too have a lusty side to our nature. Most of us have it under control. It doesn't often get out of hand, but sometimes it does, and if we're completely honest with ourselves, we must admit that it is ever present. I suppose there are times when all of us would like to break loose from convention and the patterns that paralyze our actions and do things that we want to do, satisfy our appetites, and fulfill our desires regardless of the consequences. Yes, we're like Herod in this respect that we have this lusty side, but.....on the other hand it ought to be stated that we also have another side to our nature. We know a good thing for instance when we see it. We're drawn to something good even though we may be disturbed by it. We have this thing called conscience - this needle that can be attracted and held by a magnetic pole, and it's almost impossible to extinguish it, and bury it. And yet like Herod, we're often unable to move in the direction which it points. We're drawn by something which we recognize to be good, something that's better than ourselves, we know it, we recognize it, and yet somehow we are powerless to move toward it.

THREE REASONS In the case of King Herod there were three things that prevented him from moving in the direction of his conscience, and I'll just touch upon them briefly and as I do, perhaps you'll see yourself fitting into the picture. Herod was caught. He didn't want to kill John, and instead of responding to his conscience, he gave into the pressures of three relatively good things.

First of all his wife, Herodias, prevented him from moving in the direction of his own conscience. I think that we can assume that Herod loved his wife. After all he can go to great measure to marry her, and in so doing, he had exposed himself to slander and gossip, but given the limitations of his soul, and the shallowness of his nature, I think we can assume that he loved her very much, and wanted to do everything possible, every possible thing to please her. She was outraged by Joh, and I ask you, what is worse than the fury of an outraged woman, especially when the woman is a person like Herodias. Now I'm not suggesting that our wives prevent us from moving in the direction of our conscience, heaven forbid, if I were to suggest such a thing, I'd be confronted, I'm sure with the fury of more than one outraged woman, but what I'd like to suggest is something like this: people often do the wrong things for the sake of the person they love. For instance, think of a wife who cares greatly for the things of the spirit as set forth in the life of the church, and yet in order to satisfy her husband who is completely indifferent to such things, she eliminates them completely. Or take a man in business who is married to

a woman who loves all of the things that money can buy - clothes, jewels and automobiles, - and in order to please her and keep her happy finally ends up robbing the resources of the business treasury. Or take a son whose parents want him to go into business when he would much rather be an architect, or a musician or a doctor. Or take the head of an institution who does the wrong thing in order to please and satisfy one person on the staff whom he does not want to hurt. This was the dilemma that Herod was caught in, and it's one that we sometimes get caught in - doing the wrong thing for the sake of the person we love.

Now the second reason why Herod didn't travel in the direction of his conscience lies in the fact that he made a rather rash and silly promise in a weak moment, and he was determined not to break his promise and go back on his word. Well, you say, there's nothing wrong with that. What's better than for a man to keep his promise. But pause for a moment and think of the people who have been misled by the relative virtue of a promise that they made. Think of the men in political life who in order to keep their promise to their constituents, let down some opportunity to stand for a cause that is good and right regardless of what their constituents think. Or think of a minister if you will, and I can't help but think of these things in terms of my own life, and my own profession, think of a minister who in order to keep his promise to his people not to ask for more money, or not to take part in some particular cause, or to change anything in the church, pass by an opportunity to move things forward and to build a stronger church and to bring the Kingdom of God a little closer.

And the third reason rests in the fact that he didn't want to embarrass himself in the eyes of his friends. He wanted to maintain the favor his many friends at the banquet. They had heard his promise. Their moral standards were not as high. Their favor was easily won and lost. He didn't want to lose any popularity with them. Herod had not learned what so many of us have found it hard to learn, and what Abraham Lincoln learned as a young man, and what he said to a group of people who came to him early in the Civil War with plans for peace. He said: "I desire so to conduct the affairs of this administration that at the end when I come to lay down the reigns of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall have at least one friend left and that friend shall be deep down inside of me".

CLOSING These three things then conspired against Herod: the person he loved and wanted to please. The promise he had made, and didn't want to break. And the friends whose favor he craved and wanted so much. Three relatively good things. He was no match for them. His conscience flashed back and forth - flickered and then went out and John the Baptist was beheaded.

Is it any wonder then that when Herod heard about Jesus he said: "It must be John the Baptist whom I beheaded, risen from the dead" See what had happened. He had killed John, but he couldn't kill his conscience. It was still there, buried deep to be sure, but at the appearance of Jesus, it was aroused, it stirred again, longing to respond to something that would set it free from all of these relatively good things.

And so I leave you with this one thought. Praise God for your conscience. But never let it be your guide. For your conscience can only respond to that which is good. Let Christ be your guide. Let him

use your conscience to draw you to himself, and help you to choose between that which is good and that which is evil!

LET US PRAY:

Our Father and our God, thou hast given to each one of us this gift of conscience by which we know and understand that which is good. Help us to fix it upon Christ that we may be drawn more and more to him, and that hemay guide us through the confusing ways of moral choice to that which is good, and true, and beautiful. Amen