

## Matthew 14:1-12 Horrible History

So, why have such a gruesome story in the Bible? Why did Herod chop off John the Baptist's head and present to his step daughter on a plate? Why is it here in Matthew and what does it teach us?

Well, what was Herod's first mistake? His first mistake was actually the same as his father's. Herod the great was someone who rejected God because he was more concerned about himself. When news came that "the King of the Jews" had been born – the Son of God, Herod the Great did all he could to kill him so that he stayed on the throne; the only person he was interested in was himself, with Herod Antipas, the apple hasn't fallen too far from the tree.

And here we see how his attitude manifests itself – Herod Antipas didn't go on a family holiday to Rome, he went and stole his brother's wife. Something which shockingly showed that Herod Jr. had also rejected God.

The Bible clearly states that what Herod was doing was wrong. Back in the Old Testament in Leviticus 18:16 we read "Do not have sexual relations with your brother's wife; that would dishonour your brother." In fact the law of God only allowed a man to marry his sister-in-law if her brother died so that the family name could be continued. But Herod had ignored all that, he and his new wife had no regard for God and no regard for the opinion of their people.

The Jewish historian Jesephus wrote, "...taking it into her head [Herodias] flouted the ways of our fathers and married Herod." These two just didn't care what their respective spouses thought, they didn't care what the people around them thought and they didn't care what God thought. It was all about them, which is a pretty good definition of sin!

The problem is sin has consequences.

What happens next is that John the Baptist starts denouncing their actions, he tells it like it is, John is a preacher of truth and Herod, like any despot hates the truth. He wants to kill John there and then, but John is a popular figure and having him murdered would just create a martyr and give the people a cause to rally round. And what are tyrants most afraid of?

Ask Ghadaffi hiding in Libya, or Bashar al-Assad massacring the population in Syria – they are afraid of the wrath of the people. So a much better solution is to make John “disappear” – chuck him into prison and throw away the key.

Mark tells us that when he had done that, when Herod had John contained and unable to cause him problems he actually protected John from his wife’s bloodlust. Herodias wanted John dead in prison, but strangely Herod found himself drawn to listening what John said about God and life even though it puzzled him.

But Herod and Herodias’ relationship was steeped in sin and self-centred selfishness, so Herodias wouldn’t be denied.

Herod might think that everything is under control, but sin has become the master of his family.

So, on his birthday Herod has his friends over for a big party.

Anyone who is anyone is there; the military commanders, the high officials and the leading men of Galilee and because they all think that they are untouchable they drink too much and loose control.

Herodias’ daughter Salome, a mere girl, comes in and dances for the drunken men and the original text gives the indication

that Herod was actually sexually aroused by her dancing he is so debauched. Perhaps in his stupor he reasons that she isn't actually his daughter, just his step-daughter, just a younger version of his wife.

It is sadly a situation not uncommon today where step children are abused by the very men they should be able to trust wholeheartedly as their guardians. Fuelled by lust and alcohol Herod makes a rash promise; she can have anything she wants up to half the kingdom – after all, you never know what she might give him in return.

This is a greedy, selfish, rebellious, sinful home and so Salome runs to her mother and asks, “What shall I ask for?” The answer is as short as it is gruesome – “The head of John the Baptist on a plate”!

So, what is Herod to do? The right thing is to sober up and stand up to his wife and step-daughter's outrageous request. Mark tells us that Herod knew John was a “holy and righteous” man, but all his friends are watching, how will it look if he breaks his word? How ironic that the adulterous, wife-stealing, brother-betraying Herod is suddenly worried about appearing unfaithful!

Sin weakens and destroys our moral fibre and twists our loyalties, at first saying “no” to God is a thrill, a bit of rebellious fun, but gradually the realisation dawns – we are not controlling our sin, it is controlling us.

And so Herod caves in and John is beheaded with his severed head duly given to the girl, on a plate. Meanwhile John's disciples come and bury his body and then go to inform Jesus.

And so we come to the endgame, we see where the pieces finally come to rest, we learn what finally became of Herod.

First King Aratas of the Nabatean Arabs, the father of Herod's first wife whom he abandoned for Herodias, launched a bitter attack on Herod and inflicted a terrible defeat – how much more blood was spilled because of Herod's unfaithful heart?

Again Josephus tells us that the people regarded this defeat as divine retribution for the murder of John the Baptist. Herod has made enemies of his in-laws; the neighbouring rulers and of his people.

Second, Herodias urged her husband to go to Rome in pursuit of power, so Herod went seeking the true title "King". His reward? A slap in the face – not only was he refused the title King, but he was stripped of his fortune and realm and sent into exile to Gaul (modern day France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland) well away from anywhere he could rule. The Romans had seen his actions and they weren't impressed; he had made an enemy out of his superiors.

But the biggest consequence for Herod was that having rejected God, God rejected him, Herod made an enemy out of God. You see, after the murder of John the Baptist Herod begins to hear about Jesus and his first reaction is guilty fear – "Is this John the Baptist back from the dead? Has he come to get me?"

But that fear soon fades, after all, he's Herod, he's untouchable (the military and political humiliations are yet to come) and so when eventually Herod gets to meet Jesus he has no fear or even real interest in him.

It comes in the final hours before Jesus' crucifixion when Pilate realises Jesus is a Galilean and sends him over to Herod. The worldly king is keen for a few miracles, a bit of light entertainment from Jesus, but the King of heaven is silent before him. Who is judging who? How terrible to come before

Jesus and find that the Lord of life and judge of humanity has nothing to say to you.

A little while ago we were watching the latest “What’s in the Bible” DVD with the children. In it we were challenged; when we sin (because we all do) how will we react; will it be like King Saul who refused to turn back to God and whom God then rejected, or like King David, who when faced with his sin repented. David was so devastated that he wrote Psalm 51 where he cries out;

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”

When we sin, is that our reaction? Do we behave like King David who was rightly described as “a man after God’s own heart” despite his failings and faults, or are we set on a path of self destruction like Kings Saul and Herod who turned their backs on God and gave themselves over to their own sinful desires?

God longs for us to be like David, in Ezekiel 18:32 we read, “For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!”

There were so many times Herod could have repented, could have turned away from his sinful rebellion, but his pride, his lust, his vanity and his selfishness all stopped him. In the end he lost it all, the respect of his people, his military prowess, even his power and status and of course, his opportunity for Jesus to work the greatest miracle of all in his life – the forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God.

So, when you see sin will you be brave enough to stand up to it like John the Baptist and when you yourself sin, who will you be? Herod? Saul? Or David? Will you be a man desperate to fulfil the desires of your own heart, or a man after God’s own heart?

In short, is yours a horrible history, or a forgiven forever?

Amen.