

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 40”**  
*Matthew 14:1-12*

Time for a bit of an interlude in Matthew’s story of Jesus. He has spent some time teaching people about the Kingdom of God in a series of parables and then has been to preach at the synagogue in his home town, Nazareth. The response to his preaching has been a strange mix of amazement and hostility and he has moved on without doing any miracles, because the people had a bit of trouble believing in who he was and what he was doing. The next part of Jesus’ story – as we shall see next week – is the occasion on which he feeds 5,000 people using a very small packed lunch. In between, Matthew puts this story of the murder of John the Baptist, and within it we are able to catch an astonishing glimpse of family life with the Herods. (Please don’t try this at home, folks!)

It starts off with Herod catching wind of what Jesus has been doing in the region up to the north of where his palace is. Herod Antipas has his headquarters at Tiberias on the south western shore of Galilee and word reaches him of the things that are being said and done by Jesus and of the deployment of the disciples to preach in the area. The name of Jesus is now well known in the territory over which Herod is the puppet ruler, kept in place by the patronage of the Roman Emperor and the fear which he is able to instil into his subjects. The only trouble is, most of the people have strange ideas about who Jesus actually is.

As we read elsewhere in the gospels, some of the people think that this Jesus is actually Elijah, who has returned to herald “*the day of the LORD*”. Other people are not quite so sure, and think he might be one of the other prophets of their tradition. But there’s also a section of the population that seem to think that Jesus is actually John the Baptist who has come back from the dead to continue his work. Now that really puts the wind up Herod Antipas. He is terrified that John the Baptist has come back to haunt him, to wreak revenge on him for Herod’s part in his murder. Remember, Herod has not actually seen Jesus – he’s only heard about him, so there’s this uncertainty in his mind that Jesus really could be his nemesis. And at this point, Matthew gives us a flashback to what actually happened and why.

John the Baptist ran into trouble with Herod Antipas for two reasons. Firstly, Herod saw him as a threat politically. John was a bit of a rabble-rousing preacher and he drew huge crowds, who were very sympathetic to his message of purity and holiness, especially when that purity and holiness were set in contrast to the compromise and treachery of the rulers who had sold out, so they believed, to the occupying forces of the pagan Romans. John was actually in a position to mobilise a good deal of opposition to Herod and those who were keeping him in power. Secondly, John had been very outspoken in his criticism, his denunciation of Herod’s behaviour, particularly in regard to his marriage.

You see, the Herod dynasty was an amazing phenomenon. It’s the kind of stuff that would be too strong even for one of today’s post-9 o’clock soap operas. Herod would have made every screen baddie look good in comparison. His family was an incestuous network of social climbers and ruthless self-seekers and his behaviour was outrageous even by Roman standards, let alone the standards of the Jewish people over whom he was supposed to be the ruler.

He was politically corrupt, part of a dynasty that had made their way into power by every underhand means possible. Matthew doesn’t actually call him “*King*” Herod (and he refers to him as the king just once in this passage) because he was not actually a king. He was actually a “*tetrarch*”, someone who had responsibility for just a quarter of a territory. But he wanted to be a proper king and made no secret of that. Eventually the Emperor Caligula banished him to Gaul to ensure that his lust for power was never actually satisfied.

He was also religiously compromised. Herod was actually of Jewish descent. But it was quite clear that he had little or no sympathy for the Jewish law, other than when it might be used to help him get his own way. As we shall see, his morals were about as loose as they could be without actually falling off, and he was collaborating with the Romans – the hated, pagan, occupying power – in order to achieve, he hoped,

his own personal ambitions. He had sold his own people down the river, quite apart from the ritual and legal uncleanness that he must have engaged in. The only Jews who were likely to have anything to do with him were other people who had their own corrupt agenda for self-aggrandisement. When he was defeated in war by King Aretas and the Nabateans, many people saw it as God's judgement on him and his regime for the way in which he strayed so far from the ways of God.

And, as we've already said, his family was a script-writer's dream. It was the kind of mix of incest and intermarriage that is so often sent up by American comedians making fun of the hillbillies out in the backwoods of Arkansas. You know, the kind of place where you're introduced to someone's father, brother and cousin, and look round to discover there's actually only one person there. I looked up Josephus's account of the Herod family and was going to try and draw a family tree to work it out, but it became so complicated that I gave up. (The whole thing is further confused by the fact that there are several people with the same names.) This is a flavour of it – *Antiquities: Book XVIII, Chapter 5:4*.

The bit that we're interested in is what Matthew mentions here about Herod marrying his sister-in-law, who, if you were listening carefully just then, you'll have worked out was also his niece, daughter of Aristobulos his half-brother. In order to do that, Herod had to get rid of his first wife, Malthace, the daughter of King Aretas of Nabatea (hence the war that took place to avenge the shame Aretas felt when his daughter was rejected in favour of Herodias), and Herodias, as Josephus puts it, "*took upon herself to confound the laws of our country and divorce herself from her husband while he was still alive.*" Can you follow all that?

John the Baptist was able to follow it all, and he didn't like it. It was contrary to the Torah, the Law of the Jewish people, and it was pretty well contrary to anything else you could think of! So he told Herod what he thought of him and what God thought of it all. Can you imagine that? We probably find it very difficult to imagine today, because although newspaper comment and public opinion might be marshalled against a despotic leader who was out of line morally, it's unlikely that one person would go and challenge the leader to his face with the ways in which he was disobeying God. John did, and was thrown into prison for his trouble. Mark tells us in his Gospel that Herodias herself was furious and, understandably, "*nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him.*" There's a very strong echo in all of this of the way in which Queen Jezebel expressed her hatred of Elijah when he dared to speak out against her husband, King Ahab. Strangely, Herod did his best to protect John and even granted him a grudging respect as he went regularly to chat with him, uncomfortable as it obviously was for him.

Eventually, the opportunity presented itself for Herodias to get her revenge. It was Herod's birthday and a feast was arranged. This would have been a very lavish affair – it was no Indian take-away and a video. The palace was packed with people who all wanted to keep on the right side of Herod, and Herod himself was acting up to the occasion with his usual boastful bravado. Herodias sent her daughter in to dance. Matthew doesn't mention her name, although we know that it was Salome, Herodias's daughter from her marriage to Philip. The idea that a princess should dance in such a gathering is highly unusual, but as we've seen, the Herod family was pretty unusual all round.

Matthew doesn't go into detail about the dance, but it is generally thought to have been rather raunchy. One commentator writes, "*The dance was probably a lewd one*" (Walter Wessel), and another states with more conviction, "*Her dance was unquestionably lascivious*" (Ralph Earle). I'm not entirely sure how they can know that – I've looked for evidence that this might have been the case, but haven't found any. Maybe high-powered biblical scholars don't get out much and have to make their own entertainment in their heads! There's no doubt, though, that Herod thought it was a bit of alright and, in front of the gathered guests, made a grand and extravagant promise to her. The idea that he could have given her "*whatever she asked*" is laughable, even if he'd wanted to. There wasn't much that was actually his to give.

Anyway, Salome nips off to ask her mum what she should say and comes back with a very unusual request under the circumstances – which probably suggests that this was a put up job.. At least in this

particular there's a semblance of keeping to the Law, because Salome obeys her mother and trots off back to her step-father to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a tray (leading to a winning entry in a *New Statesman* competition for great unrecorded quotations from history: "*Salome, dear – not in the fridge!*"). Herod is now in a dilemma. He has made this promise out of a sense of bravado, most probably while drunk and in front of a palace full of important guests, many of whom would be dying for an opportunity to get one over on Herod for their own personal gain. He knows, presumably, that his wife is behind it – and she is clearly not a woman to be trifled with. And yet he doesn't really want to get rid of John just yet. Matthew says that he was "*greatly distressed*".

It doesn't seem as though he takes too long to make up his mind, though, and "*ordered that her request be granted.*" And so John the Baptist is sacrificed to save the face of a pathetic puppet ruler who has made a rash promise at his birthday party. To prove that he is really dead, the head is paraded around the feast on a tray and given to Salome, who immediately passes it on to her mother. (What on earth was she going to do with it?) His body was taken off by his followers and buried in a tomb – the forerunner of Jesus Christ, whose own ministry has prefigured that of the Messiah, now finds his death too is a foreshadowing of the death of Jesus.

Well, what improving little moral can we dig out of there for today? Not a lot, really – other than be faithful to your husband and don't put your daughter on the stage! Indeed, it's difficult to know what lesson Matthew intended to be drawn from this episode. It would take quite an imaginative preacher to find three points all beginning with P here. He is, of course, faithfully filling in some of the details surrounding the life and ministry of Jesus and this does help us to glimpse the kind of stuff that was going on among the privileged classes at the time – a reminder to us, if ever it were needed, that things are not necessarily worse today than they've ever been.

But if you do want to take some kind of encouragement from this, it is in the way in which Matthew places this story here. There will always be fierce opposition to the ways of God, always people who would rather kill the messenger than respond positively to the message. But this section moves on, as we shall see next time, with another demonstration that the good news of the Kingdom of God has had a positive effect in other places. However appalling the behaviour and attitudes of the world around may seem to us, the Kingdom continues to spread and the good tidings of God's plan for humanity can never be totally ignored or silenced. You can try and stop it in one place, but it just bursts out elsewhere. And that can't be a bad thing!

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This was contrary to the Torah, the Law of the Jewish people, and it was pretty well contrary to anything else you could think of! So John told Herod what he thought of him and what God thought of it all. Herodias was very put out by this and nursed a grudge against John. Eventually, the opportunity presented itself for her to get her revenge. On Herod's birthday a lavish feast was arranged. Herodias sent her daughter, Salome, in to dance. Herod enjoyed the dance very much and, in front of the gathered guests, made a grand and extravagant promise to her. Salome asked for the head of John the Baptist on a tray and Herod *"ordered that her request be granted."* And so John the Baptist is sacrificed to save the face of a pathetic puppet ruler who has made a rash promise at his birthday party.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. Who do people say Jesus is today? How do you respond to them?
2. John was very forthright in his criticism of Herod. Should we be so direct today? Why/why not? How should we challenge those whom we see ignoring God's ways?
3. Why do you think Herod was both attracted and repulsed by John? Does that have any parallels in our own situation?
4. Why do you think Matthew has included this story in his gospel – and why is it in this particular place?
5. What have you learned from this story? And what will you do about it?