

Dear Friends in Christ,

So the Lifetime channel has a special series of weekend made-for-television movies this summer. The series is called "Summer of Secrets" and it's advertised as "ripped from the headlines." These are stories of husbands, wives and lovers. Of murder and betrayal, immorality and revenge. Just the kind of thing that we love to hear about, for the sad reason that our eyes are drawn to the drama that evil creates. Unfortunate. But, that being the case--have I got a story for you! It's the New Testament story of the beheading of John the Baptist. A tale right up there with the Old Testament story of the adultery of King David and Bathsheba. Man--that Bible! Talk about "made for television."

Let's take a closer look at this study in contrasts.

The lesson begins with King Herod's conviction that Jesus is John the Baptist, come back to life. This King Herod was the son of Herod the Great--who we met in the Epiphany story when the Magi were looking for the "new-born king of the Jews". Herod the Great was the *official* "king of the Jews," appointed by the Roman senate. Though ruler of the Jews, he was a Roman by conviction and preference. He liked the lavish life-style of a Roman leader--the wealth, the power over life and death, the world position.

When he died, Herod left three living sons. He'd had the fourth one killed, causing some Roman wit to say of him: "It's better to be Herod's pig than his son." The three remaining sons split their father's kingdom. At the time of our gospel lesson, son Philip had been ousted from power *by the treachery of his own mother*, and was now living as a citizen in Rome. Herod Antipas--the Herod of this story--was ruler in Galilee.

Raised in the Roman style, Herod Antipas was used to taking what he wanted--both in his professional and his personal life. While married to another woman, Herod seduced his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. Herod and Herodias--neither of whom divorced their former spouses--lived as husband and wife. On top of that, they were related by blood. Philip was his own wife's uncle, and Herod--her new lover--was Philip's half-brother--and so Herodias's half-uncle. These circumstances--both the adultery and the blood-relationship of Herod and Herodias--were clearly against Jewish law.

Not to mention confusing. See what I mean about "made for television"?

Into this mix comes John the Baptist. A strange character--living out in the wilderness, dressed in the roughest of clothes, eating off the land--and preaching a message of repentance for sin. It's no wonder that he used Herod and Herodias as an example; a bad example of the immorality and perversion that ruled the land.

Herodias hated John and wanted him dead. His words must have stung her as only public exposure of sin can sting. But beyond the personal aspect of John's words was the revolutionary zeal he provoked. Herodias had no desire to lose her place as Queen, after she'd left her loser first husband to gain it.

Herod was a little less fervent in his hatred of John. Maybe he had more of a conscience that his "wife." At the very least, he knew that killing John would further inflame the Jewish people against him.

And so, though Herod imprisoned John and kept him in chains, he kept him safe from his wife's blood lust. In fact, scripture tells us that Herod knew John as a righteous and holy man (the very opposite of himself); that Herod liked to listen to John, though John's call for repentance and preparation for the coming of the Messiah "perplexed" Herod.

Still, wife Herodias was constantly looking for a way to be rid of John. The opportune moment came when Herod had a big birthday party. Such a celebration was itself despised by the Jews as a pagan custom. To this feast Herod invited those who held high civil offices in his administration, the military officers in his army, and finally the prominent men of Galilee. It was quite a shin-dig.

Into this strictly stag-party atmosphere of booze and bragging, Herodias sent her daughter, Salome, to perform a dance for the guests. And you can bet it wasn't ballet or tap!

Herod was so delighted with the response to Salome's entertainment that he spoke in haste--promised the girl anything she wanted--even to half his Kingdom. This was a stupid promise--Herod was ruler in Galilee only by the permission of Rome. The kingdom belonged to Rome, not to him. He had no authority to give **any** of it away. But, before he thought it through, the words were out of his mouth.

Salome, obedient daughter that she was, went out and asked her mother what she should request. This was just what Herodias was waiting for, and her answer was immediate: the head of John the Baptist on a

platter--now. No chance for Herod to procrastinate, and hope the whole thing would blow over. I guess Herodias had no compunction about involving her daughter as an accessory to a murder.

Herod, on hearing the request, was (we're told) deeply grieved--but--his conscience wasn't strong enough to override his pride. He'd made the promise publically--in front of all of these important men. Now he felt he had to honor it, or lose their admiration and his own self-esteem.

And so he ordered one of his guards to do the deed. John was beheaded and his head displayed for all to see, after which Salome presented it to "mommy dearest."

Let's think for a moment about the characters in this drama. Salome--a young woman expected to erotically perform before powerful men. The hyper-sexualization of girls is clearly nothing new.

Herodias--a woman with no conscience: power hungry, used to luxury, a grudge-holder, unwilling to be confronted with her sins. Vengeful--and an opportunist; always looking for the chance to get her own way, careless of whom it hurt.

Maybe we don't see ourselves in that character. Or maybe, on our very worst days, we do.

Then there are Herod's guests. Political hangers-on; there for the food, the booze and the advantage of being seen as aligned to the most powerful man in the land. The truth of John's accusations doesn't matter to them. They're experts at explaining uncomfortable truths away.

And Herod. A man used to being in charge--but "cursed", perhaps, with some moral sensitivity. Puzzled by, yet at the same time attracted to, that righteousness and the certainty of John. Wishing he could be as sure about right and wrong. Maybe wishing he could overcome the sin in his life--but feeling helpless to do it. He was a man on the fence--driven by his own desires, while longing for a better, a more virtuous life. He imprisons John, but keeps him alive; chains him, but likes to listen to what John has to say. Perhaps we see our own reflection in this ambiguity. That desire to have it all--both what we want, and what God wants. And opting, as often as not, for what we want.

Further, Herod is a man who speaks without thinking, and who's more concerned about what others think about him than about doing what's right. Each of us has certainly been there. Peer pressure isn't only for the young, especially these days.

And that's exactly the contrast with John. John cares nothing for the opinion of people. He lives to speak the word of God, no matter who hates him for it. Like the prophet Amos before him, John has been called by God to **speak the truth to power**, though it puts his life at risk. John has insulted the Jewish leaders by calling them a "brood of vipers", castigated the Roman elite, and enraged the queen by calling attention to her immorality. Even in prison, he doesn't change his tune. No begging for mercy. No softening of the message. Sin can only give way to true repentance--a "turning around" in life--turning one's back on sin and facing toward God, who is the Almighty and righteous judge.

Of this bunch only John--imprisoned as he is--can be called a liberated man. A man who knows himself and knows his God. *A man who is totally dependent on God--and so the only one of the three who is truly free of the tyrannies of the world--power, lust, ego, position, the opinion of others.*

Herodias is left with blood on her hands. Salome is damaged. The party-goers are chained to their ambition. Herod is filled with a haunting guilt that leaves him seeing John's ghostly challenge in every righteous man. Only John inspires our admiration. Our spiritual longing gravitates only toward him.

This story--bizarre as it seems--is important. It's a reminder that every generation is plagued with sinful impulses. Unless we confront the sin in and around us, we have no reason to turn to God for protection and direction. We remain captive to that sin.

Ultimately we know in our heart of hearts that it is better to be a faithful martyr than a faithless King. There is a joy in serving God that's never found in pleasing ourselves. And we know that God-centeredness is the inheritance that we have received through Jesus Christ; so that we might, as St. Paul writes, "live for the praise of God's glory." To this end we were sealed with the Holy Spirit--that through our devotion to our Lord we might point others always toward God, who desires to love, forgive, and empower all of humanity for faithful living.

God grant us the grace and courage to face the truth and to live that life.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen