

## Sunday Thought

11th July 2021 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

### Readings

2 Samuel 6:1- 5, 12b - 19

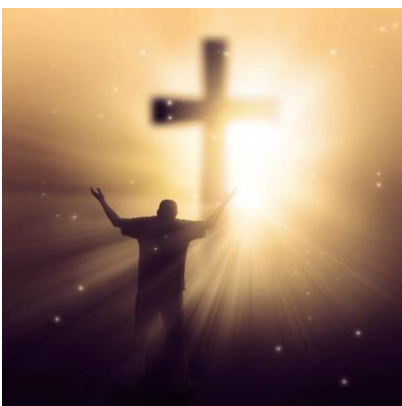
Psalm 24

Ephesians 1: 3 – 14

Mark 6: 14 - 29

### Afraid of Love

Sporting victories have brightened the news stories recently and have been a refreshing break from endless reports on the pandemic, world-wide disasters, and threats from global warming in addition to war, poverty and hunger. There often seems to be a loathsome shadow of fear hanging over so many of our radio and television news bulletins. That same shadow wafts, like the perfume and scanty dresses of dancing girls, through King Herod's spectacular party in today's Gospel reading. The fear at the feast was primarily Herod's which drunkenly led to the appalling and gruesome death of John the Baptist.



This is a story is close to home for followers of Jesus in over fifty different countries like North Korea, Afghanistan, Nigeria ... where religious persecution is rife and for many attending a church service is a risk to life and family. Records from last year [*Information from Open Doors World Watch List*] show a total of at least thirteen new Christian martyrs every day. My calculation makes that near five thousand a year. Thousands more, including whole families suffer torture while places of worship are closed and often destroyed. There are a variety of reasons for the persecutions but behind them all is a curtain of fear. Governments and people can be *afraid of the Christians!!* In the same way as superstitious Herod feared John, and Chief Priests and Pharisees wanted to see Jesus on a Cross because they feared him and his ministry.

Herod held the Baptist in high regard as a good and holy man, but John was among those who questioned the right of Herod to be king of the Jews because he was of Arab descent and his grandfather a late convert to Judaism. Now, because Herod had married his own brother's wife Herodias, John openly condemned him. To save face, Herod had him imprisoned, but still maintained conversations with John in the prison. Those private 'chats' were often disturbing to this man who loved the limelight and sought to curry favour with all parties. John had put him in a difficult position, which his wife Herodias took advantage of at the party, to dispose of her enemy. The story is recorded here in detail by Mark who tells of the State banquet at which religious and military leaders and chief citizens were guests. Much revelry, wine and dancing led to the king's drunken boasting putting himself in an impossible fix. John had to die.

I could take more space to write of Herod's fears of Jewish and Roman leaders who opposed him and maybe to imagine Herodias' bedtime arguments. Behind it all was the king's fear of a holy man who, with Jesus, believed that true life for people and nations demanded repentance and a resolve to live by God's commandments of love for him and for all neighbours – the way of truth, honesty, justice, mercy ... and grace. It was this *Jesus Way* that was so fearful!

There will be exceptions, but I thought of how so much Christian persecution is, similarly, a reaction to the way of love – the way of The Kingdom of God – a fear of goodness and holiness faithfully lived! The amazing thing is that in most of the countries where there is persecution of the Church today the martyrs are being replaced! The love of God, like the Church of Christ will not be destroyed. We are people of the resurrection for whom suffering and death is not the end. When we really live out together the costly way of Jesus and the Cross, the Gospel remains God's powerful force for personal change and world transformation. We may sometimes think of the church as weak, ineffectual, even corrupt, but when we live God's Kingdom way together we possess this powerful, eternal, victorious power - God's sacrificial love by which everything is created and sustained!

One more thought about Mark's story. He gives two incidental facts. John's death took place when Jesus' disciples were away on mission, and John's disciples arranged a quiet burial of his body. Jesus could well have been taking time alone, and I wondered if he joined John's friends? After all, he and John were related and close, having spent family time together as young men, and then with the desert faith communities, preparing for their interrelated ministry. Jesus spoke of John as *the greatest man born*. [Luke 7:28]. It was surely a time for him to think about his own impending death – the Cross - which is still cause for sinners' fear and repentance - and hope for the world's salvation!

**A Prayer** [with today's Psalm in mind]

*Father God, you are Lord of all things and of all people.  
Yours is the greatness of truth, purity and grace.  
How can we possibly be worthy to enter your presence?  
We must be renewed in our lives, to live the way of your Kingdom.*

*We give thanks. Jesus makes us worthy as we believe and trust in him.  
By his Cross he has become the open door  
through which we enter into all you are and all you have for us.*

