

# 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

11.07.2021  
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## Introduction

It is difficult – and perhaps that is an understatement – to write of the spirituality of conflict when the key event of the text is the beheading of a man at the request of a young adult. The contrast of the pleasure of the king at the dancing of his daughter with the violent death of John the Baptist is drawn with a sword-sharp bitterness. The father becomes the reluctant deliverer of an order he regrets, and yet that regret is not enough to prevent the execution, and resultant presentation of the head of John on a platter to the girl. The event is shocking, traumatic; incomprehensible in the contrast of dance and death. The story is unforgiving and the consequences of that death for those who loved John are largely unseen.

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## Text

Mark 6:14–29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

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## Comment

‘When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.’

For some conflicts, only the immediate responses of grief are possible. It is not the time to consider whether there is anything to be gained, nor to discover a ray of hope, or to ‘trace the rainbow through the rain’ as the Victorian hymn would have it. There are times when warm words, or even comfort, are not helpful or appropriate, when grief must be given its hour to be all there is to say, to be, or to do.

The churning of the stomach, rising of the throat, the tears – or maybe the lack of them – are all common responses to traumatic loss. Staring is another, or looking away, or covering the eyes with our hands. Traumatized people may seek company, or seek isolation. Rocking, moaning and crying are all normal but not necessarily to be expected. We find we do not know where to look. The physical sensations of grief may so overwhelm us that we can only do what needs to be done. We choose in these moments the company of those we know sufficiently well to be honest and only say one thing, or say nothing. Sometimes we don’t have that choice. The people we need to speak to are the police, the army, or the medical authorities; maybe even the people we hold responsible for the trauma itself. John’s disciples need to go to the murderer’s house to ask for the body back. ‘When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb’.

Scripture does not spell out to us what John’s disciples were thinking; we are given nothing of what they said to each other. Privacy may have been their primary need, we cannot know. At these moments a person at a different place in a different grief story may seem like an intrusion or a fire in the soul. For some in grief there is a time when they are at capacity and have no ability to sympathise with others. This is not a criticism– these things will come, empathy will return, but they are how they are for the moment.

There are books and books on what to say and what not to say to the grieving; manuals for bereavement, books on pastoral care or on counselling, on interventions or responses acceptable and unacceptable, allowed and disallowed. Titles such as ‘101 Things not to say to a grieving person’ or ‘What not to say to a grieving heart’ offer advice by which we may judge our conduct or moderate our tone, but they cannot provide a cure for the enormity of traumatic loss, nor actually provide a guide through an experience like that. Many grieving people have a story of a person who said the wrong thing, the moment of a miscommunication, the irritation of the well-meaning words in the wrong place. For some, that grief is also the end of a friendship, the breaking of a trust as the response of those endeavouring to help or assist does not match the self-identified needs of the bereaved. Yet for others, the sincere contact of a person they know loves them, who yet says all the wrong things, is a favourable balm to the pitch-perfect intervention of the well-meant but overly schooled response. The truth is, in the conflict of traumatic bereavement, there is no right or wrong thing to say in itself; all this judging of others is also about the enormity of what has happened and the finality of loss. It can also be about the need of the bereaved to choose their own support, the circling of a group, the defining of who is now in or out.

Trauma may lead to a mask of trauma response, a total shutting down of the emotions. For some, there is even the loss of an ability to articulate. After Piper Alpha, the survivors spoke of feeling blank; after the bomb in London on 7th July 2005, there were pictures of survivors hugging lamp posts or trees– inanimate or animate, the trauma was so great some solid point of contact was required. A COVID doctor recently spoke of being grimly relieved his face mask was in place as it hid his tears from patients and colleagues alike. He preferred to cry and not be comforted– he did not want the trauma of COVID softened. The traumatized person cannot be expected to respond in any particular way, and the thought that the practitioner, friend, or fellow grieving person could divine some response which was perfect or even suitable is to raise too high a bar for ourselves and for each other. If the doctor needs to cry, and needs not to share those tears, who am I to criticise?

This beheading of a man at a request so glibly given at a birthday banquet is a story of a horrific event, and the response in one line of text seems reasonable and normal: 'When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.' It is the re-humanising of the dehumanised. The coming and caring for the mortal remains, the doing of all that it is possible to do. Conflict causes grief, and in this story, the violent grief of a murdered leader, the loss of their friend and guide must have been overwhelming. Yet grief in its turn may cause conflict, and this is a part of who we are as grieving people trying to assimilate the facts of an event that should not be. A something which should not have happened, a violence of the fabric of life as we lived it.

I am not sure whether I can see a spirituality in this traumatising conflict. Nor do I want to repeat the platitudes of the pastoral care manual. Memories of the interconnectedness of anger and traumatic loss make it hard for me to accept such books at face value. Equally, I am aware there are so many times in my life when I have said what was perceived to be the wrong thing, or said what seemed to be the right thing, but in the face of such loss that the words themselves were hollow and small. Nor do I want to promulgate a theology of 'presence'; to suggest that the actions of John's disciples, in being there for each other, in the taking of that severed body as a group, and then placing it in the tomb, was in some way compensatory or enough for them.

Some conflict causes death. It is unacceptable and wrong, an injustice for which there is no justice. Some griefs are too raw to mend or cure, to salve or sanctify with spirituality. But that does not mean there is no future, no healing, no redemption. It just takes ever so much more time than we might think.

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## Response

Is there one?

Can you think of a situation in which you have been where there was no right thing to be said to you? No words to be heard? No justice for the wrong you suffered? What has brought healing? What has never healed?

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## Prayer

God of Justice,

Who is in and through a world of injustices, we pray for all who have suffered a traumatic loss: a murder, an accident, a suicide, a terrorist attack, a war, for whom the loss is compounded by a moral injury, a hurt that may not be redeemed in this world. We ask that in the spirit of the martyrs, you may hear our prayers, however faltering the words or difficult the circumstances.

Through Jesus who cried 'forgive them, Father' from the cross.

Amen

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