

THE RESURRECTION OF CONSCIENCE

"But when Herod heard thereof, he said, It is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead." Mark 6:16.

Of all the Herods known to history the one with whom students of the New Testament are best acquainted is Herod Antipas. He was the second son of Herod the Great and Malthace of Samaria, one of his ten wives. The father was the one who sought the destruction of the infant Saviour and slaughtered the children at Bethlehem. In the second of his father's wills Herod Antipas had been designated his sole successor, with the title of King, but in the last will he was to receive only Galilee and Perea with the title of Tetrarch. He contested this last will of Herod the Great, but Augustus sustained the will, and Archelaus was given his chance Judea.

Herod Antipas first married a daughter of Aretas, king of the Nabataeans. This marriage secured peace between his country and the neighboring country of Arabia. It pleased the Emperor at Rome, and, so far as we know, it gave Herod a happy home.

In the meantime he visited Rome, where his brother Philip was living. While a guest in his home Herod Antipas seduced Herodias and persuaded her to leave her husband and to go with him. She agreed to leave Philip, though she had a daughter, Salome, on condition Antipas get rid of his own wife. When the latter heard that her husband had actually agreed to this dastardly proposal, she fled for refuge to her father, King Aretas. After her departure, Herod Antipas married Herodias. It was as sorry a mess as besmirches marriage today in many cases. Each divorced the husband or wife in order to marry. Besides they were close kin, uncle and niece, and atrocious thing in itself from the Jewish standpoint. This flagrant conduct on their part outraged the best Jewish public sentiment.

During the ministry of John the Baptist there was still much indignant talk about it. It is not surprising that, when Herod learned of the proximity of John the Baptist to his palace, he sent for him, provided for him a place in which to preach, went often to hear him, heard him gladly, and did many things which John advised him to do. Perhaps it was because of his burdened conscience and uneasy spirit that he sought the companionship of so unlikely a court preacher as John.

John the Baptist did not endorse the sinful practices of the king. He did not hesitate to condemn adultery, and to reprove Antipas for taking his brother's wife, and for all the other evil things which he had done. He said, "It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife." Thus he boldly rebuked the royal hearer and denounced him for the continued commission of adultery and incest. John not only declared the connection with Herodias to be criminal, but he called upon him to put her away, since the laws of God and of man forbade their living together.

Herod Antipas was displeased with John for his plain preaching, and Herodias was deeply offended and highly indignant. Reproofs are seldom well received. Most people will rise with anger against any person who is so much their friend as to

tell them of their faults. As one might expect, Herod's officers were immediately commissioned to bind John the Baptist and to cast him into one of the dungeons. The real feeling of Herod toward John is not easy to understand. Matthew tells us that he wanted to put him to death, but feared the multitude that counted him as a prophet. Mark tells us that he feared John, knowing that he was a righteous man, and that he kept him in prison and listened to him on other occasions. So, it seems that Herod knew that John was right and was deeply impressed by his messages in the prison; also, he resented his plain bold denunciation of Herodias and himself. These moods of rage were largely due to the constant prodding of Herodias, who had it in for John and desired to kill him, but could not. She was a desperate woman and was determined to get vengeance on this preacher who had dared to denounce her sins. Probably she thought that through the preacher's admonitions she might lose her influence and be sent back to her former husband. She therefore urged the king, not merely to imprison but to kill him in order that they might no longer be troubled with him. Herod refused to yield to her demand, knowing that John was a righteous man. No doubt Herod knew that the God whose cause a man pleads will avenge any injury to him. The prisoner was not afraid of the king. What has anybody to fear who is on God's side? Those who are with him possess a never-failing source of confidence and joy, and exult in defiance of their opponents, even though tortures are prepared for their destruction.

There came a day when Herod had a great birthday party to which his "lords, and the high captains, and the chief men of Galilee" were invited. It was an occasion after Herod's own heart. He loved the display of it, the sense of importance it gave him, and the opportunity of self-indulgence. It was a royal feast, with plenty of royal entertainment--aerobats, clowns, jugglers, dancers and singers. But the most thrilling feature of the feast was reserved for the last. At one end of the palace the curtains opened, and out stepped the beautiful Salome, the daughter of Herodias. She came before the king's seat at the banqueting table, bowed before him and then, arrayed in her filmy robe, began to dance, whirling about faster and faster. At length the dance came to a climax as Salome wheeled in front of Herod and flung her bejeweled arms into the air. The palace rang with the approving shouts of the lords and nobles as they applauded and pounded on the table in their delight. When the applause had subsided, tipsy from the wine consumed, Herod leaned over toward Salome and said, "Salome, that was wonderful! The best I have ever seen! Ask what thou wilt, and I will give it to thee, even to the half of my kingdom!

Salome went out to consult her mother as to the thing for which she should ask. Herodias seized the opportunity to execute the vengeance that she had been waiting for, and she said, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist." The light of expectation faded from the face of Salome as she said, "No, not that, mother. That would not please me. I want--."

"No matter what you want, Salome ! It is not what you want but what I want; and what I want is the head of John the Baptist!"

The hum of conversation ceased and the curtain parted again and Salome came in and took her stand before the king. Everyone was eager and curious to know what she was going to ask. Bending toward her Herod said, "Well, Salome, what is it? What are you going to ask? "Give me the head of John the Baptist in a charger!" When Herod heard that, his face inflamed with the wine, blanched, and the goblet shook in his hand, "No; not that, girl! Not the head of John, that righteous man!

Ask anything else, or the head of anyone else; but not the head of John, that man of God!"

But when Herod said that, the nobles and lords began to remind him of his promise. One said, "Herod, don't go back on your word. Remember that you promised to give the girl anything that she asked."

Now come one of those great sentences that only the Bible can utter: "And the king was sorry." The king was exceedingly sorry for his extreme rashness. The king within man's conscience, his better self, is always sorry when he is about to yield to temptation. That is the deepest sorrow of all, the sorrow of the king within us. The knowledge of good, the reverence for good, mourns over the evil within us.

Herod was horrified at perpetrating the atrocious deed, but rather than antagonize Herodias by a refusal, he consented to the request. Summoning an officer of the guard, he commanded him to go and sever the head of John the Baptist from his body and to return with it in a charger.

Down in his dungeon the lonely John heard the tread of the officer and the two soldiers coming down the winding stone steps into the dungeon and into his cell. Then he heard the sound of the iron key as it was thrust into the door. John thought to himself, "Herod is sending for me again to preach another sermon to him. What shall I choose for my text this time?"

Yes, John, you are going to preach another sermon to Herod; but this will be your last and your greatest sermon, a sermon the accents of which will echo forever and ever.

And there it is! The head of John the Baptist in a charger, as Salome holds the silver charger up before the king with that ghastly trophy upon it. Don't turn away Herod! This is what you asked for! Look, Herod! Here is the head of John the Baptist! Forever you will see this head; in the midst of your pleasures and dissipations, in the discharge of your duties as the Tetrarch of Galilee, at brightest noonday, and in the watches of the night. Look, Herod! This is what you will see! And he could not forget that innocent blood had been shed, and under that conviction he was rendered miserable.

Some time afterward, having heard remarkable accounts of Christ, he was filled with perplexing fears, lest this should be the very person now restored to life whom he had beheaded. Herod had never seen Jesus, but he had seen John and still saw him at night as the head on a charger came slipping toward him in the dark. It seems that the remembrance of John the Baptist haunted him as a continual accuser. How powerful is the voice of conscience! Amid all the pomps of a palace it will speak, and make the king upon his throne tremble. The mind of Herod could not be quieted by all the blandishments of his amorous queen, nor by his own libertine principles. Recalling the violence he committed, he was trouble by the apprehension of John's returning to life.

As usual, Herod went up to Jerusalem to the Passover. The murder of John the Baptist weighed more heavily upon his conscience than did the abduction of his brother's wife. But it was nothing to the world. Who cared what became of the Baptist? Only those few disciples who came by night and carried away his headless

body for burial. If Herod could go to the Passover while living with Herodias there was nothing to prevent his going after the death of John, so he went up to Jerusalem to keep the feast.

Jesus had also gone to Jerusalem to that Passover. And while He was there He had been betrayed by one of His disciples into the hands of the Jewish authorities and had been brought before the Sanhedrin, who had promptly sentenced Him to death. Not having the power to put Him to death themselves, they sent Him to Pilate, the Roman Governor, to have their sentence ratified and to have Him executed. But Pilate made some difficulty about it. It was beneath the dignity of a Roman Procurator to put any man to death at the bidding of another court. The accused must be tried according to the laws of Rome. So Pilate examined Him and announced to the Jews that he found no fault in Him. This, of course, did not satisfy the priests. They had condemned Him to death and they were determined that Pilate should put Him to death and they were determined that Pilate should put Him to death, regardless of what he thought of His guilt. In his perplexity Pilate fortunately discovered that Jesus belonged to Galilee, which was part of the country over which Herod ruled. And Herod was at that very time in Jerusalem, so Pilate sent Jesus to him.

When Herod was told that Jesus was being brought to him, he was "exceeding glad". It was not the first time that he had heard of Him. He was glad for the opportunity to examine so remarkable a prisoner, but his motive was no better than a curious desire of seeing some miracle performed by this worker of wonders. And when Jesus came Herod asked Him a great variety of questions, "but He answered him not." Our Lord knew that he was unscrupulous, tyrannical, weak, cunning, capricious, sensual and superstitious. He well knew his character, what opportunities of information he had neglected, what convictions he had resisted, and therefore He refused to afford him any further instructions. Herod began like a fox but he ended in being a reprobate. It is reprobation when the Lord refuses to answer anything. Herod's day of grace had lasted long, but at last it came to an end. Herod had had many opportunities, and at one time he was almost persuaded to become a Christian. At one time he was not very far from the kingdom of God. But all of that was in the long past. Long ago he had smothered and silenced his conscience, so at last he was to be let alone forever.

At last the judgment of God overtook this proud officer. He suffered such a total defeat in battle with Aretas, King of Arabia, whose daughter he had married and divorced, that the Jews themselves considered it as the effect of divine vengeance upon him for the murder of John the Baptist. He was afterward driven from his high station with disgrace, and he was banished to Lyons in Gaul. His adulterous queen accompanied her husband, and both of them died in exile there. Christians certainly do not waste any sympathy upon this couple of home-wreckers. The lurid light of their wicked lives flares up beside the steady flame of John the Baptist and Jesus our Lord.