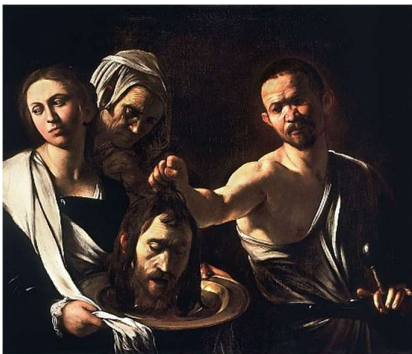


ADDRESS	11 July 2021	Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
2 Samuel 6.1-5, 12b-19	The ark comes to Zion	<i>Open our minds, O Lord, to hear and to understand your Word, and open our hearts to do your will. We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.</i>
Psalms 24	The king of glory	
Ephesians 1.1-14	Our spiritual inheritance	
Mark 6.14-29	Beheading of John Baptist	

That Gospel reading was a lovely gruesome story, wasn't it? something to think about while we have morning tea. The story of the birthday banquet, the tyrant, the prophet, the mother and the dancer.

The gospel writer does not give us the name of Herod's daughter, but the Jewish historian Josephus calls her Salomé and tells us she was his step-daughter, not his biological daughter. Biologically, she was his niece.

The story has inspired many artists, in many media,



this is how the Italian artist Caravaggio imagined it around 1610, *Salomé with the head of John the Baptist*.

Oscar Wilde wrote a one-act tragedy around the story in 1891, calling Salomé's dance the *Dance of the Seven Veils*; the play so scandalised the Lord Chamberlain that it was banned in England for 40 years. In 1905 the play became the basis of an opera by Richard Strauss -- by then, Salomé and her Seven Veils had replaced John as the focus of dramatic interest.

Late-night partying by powerful men fueled by alcohol and ignited by sexual desire can often have tragic consequences – ask anyone who works in Parliament House in Canberra, as I once did. Or in any State parliament or city hall.

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We know what happened to John Baptist's body, we are told that his disciples *came and took the body and buried it in a tomb*.(v. 29). In the 5th century a church was built over the reputed tomb,



in the village of Sebastia, ancient Samaria, today in the West Bank. The church was enlarged by the Crusaders in the 12 C, and destroyed by the Muslims in the 13th C. But the tomb was not disturbed. The Muslim conquerors covered it with a dome in the midst of the Crusader ruins, for the Qur'an includes John among the righteous of God, teaching that his life is an example the faithful should follow.

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We are not sure what happened to John's head. I have stood here



in the great mosque in Damascus, in front of the shrine which is said to hold his embalmed head. But it could also be the head enshrined in the Church of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome, or the head enshrined in the cathedral of Amiens in France, or it could even be the head preserved in the Residenz Museum in Munich, along with other relics. Each of these is said to be the head of the prophet, brought back to Europe by pious Crusaders.

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Or, of course, his head could simply have been thrown away with the palace garbage.

The gospel-writer calls Herod Antipas a king, but the Romans never acknowledged a royal title, calling him simply *tetrarch*, the subordinate ruler of part of his father's former kingdom. The gospel story presents him as a reluctant executioner, trapped by a foolish promise made in a late-night, party, fuelled by lots of wine and by an erotic dance, not by a sensuous slave girl, as was the custom, but by the king's own daughter.

It's a warning to all of us to be careful about what we promise, and especially when we are over-stimulated, by food or drink, or good company, or worldly success!

A second thing to note about the story is that it is dropped into the Gospel account of Jesus' early ministry. It's a story in parenthesis. The gospel-writer tells us that Herod was concerned that Jesus' miracles showed that he might be John the Baptist risen from the dead, Oh, and by the way, did I mention that Herod had had John executed a few months before?

The gruesome story made full sense only in the context of the life of Jesus, just as the value of all that we do or say can be judged only in the context of our relationship with the triune God.

Thirdly, this is another story about paying the price for our actions, or for speaking out.

Today's Old Testament reading tells us that David paid the price of joyful religious enthusiasm. His queen lost all respect for him when he leaped and danced in the street, wearing an ephod that was too short, too revealing.

John the Baptist paid the price for reminding the powerful of a greater power, by condemning the tetrarch for breaking the commandments of the Torah, which forbid Jews from marrying their brother's wife. (Leviticus 18.16, 20.21)

Stephen paid the price for proclaiming Christ in the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jewish authorities. He was taken outside the city walls and stoned to death.

Thousands of early Christians paid the price for honouring Christ as God rather than the emperor, we have St Paul's testimony to this:

To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly-clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

(1 Corinthians 4.11-13)

Since the end of the Roman empire, thousands of men and women, and children, have paid the price since for worshipping in the way they believed best honoured God -- Catholics and Protestants during the Reformation, Confessing Lutherans in the 3rd Reich; Christians in Syria and Iraq, and many more, throughout history.

Today, in a divided church, in a divided world, we can pay the price for speaking our mind, within the church and beyond, especially on contentious issues like sexual assault or euthanasia or homosexuality. Ask Israel Folau. We may not lose our lives, but we can lose our job, we can lose our reputation, we can be sued and lose money.

So, when we are tested, the challenge is, 'Are we willing to pay the price?' Of being thought a little odd, by being excluded from work functions, by being called a 'wowsler', holier than thou, or

whatever? For simply saying, *I am a Christian* or *I go to such and such a church. Would you like to come with me one Sunday?* For condemning exploitation in the workplace, by an employer or a union delegate? For condemning the greed that cut costs or inflates prices? For standing up against those who want to silence Christian voices in debates on current issues?

Unless we speak out for God, for most of us the highest price we have to pay is getting up in the dark for a few Sundays in winter to be here by 8 o'clock.

Two years ago, the Federal government released the draft of an Act to allow all Australians, regardless of their religious belief or activity, to participate fully in our national life. The draft has been revised several times, but has not come to Parliament to be debated.

Now the Federal Education Minister, Alan Tudge, is being pressured to extend his proposed law to provide for freedom of speech in our universities to all parts of our society. To protect those who speak up against the noisy minority which condemns Christianity as repressive and out of date, along with other relics of the past, like majority rule, patriotism and the acceptance of difference.

We have to accept that there is a price to be paid for honouring Christ as Lord in our own time, and speaking out for him. Too many of those who call themselves Christians are unwilling to pay the price, and many, many people are lost to God as a result.

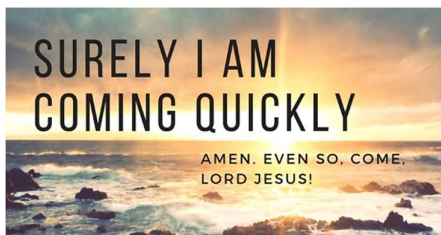
So the Bible, from beginning to end, looks beyond the present to God's glorious future. Jesus taught about a kingdom of heaven, which had begun with his coming to earth, but would be consummated only at the end of time.

This is the message Paul repeated over and over in his letters to churches being persecuted by both the Jewish and the Roman authorities. This is just one example:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the children of God.
(Romans 8.18-19)

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In God's good time, the forces of evil will be defeated, and God's will will be done. In the meantime, we can only continue to live in faith, hope and love, and to



pray with Christians of all ages, *Lord, come quickly.*

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For Connections

TODAY'S ADDRESS

Herod Antipas, John the Baptist and Jesus

(Mark 6.14-29)

- A foolish promise
- A story in parenthesis
- Paying the price