

Evensong for The Beheading of John the Baptist

Matthew 14•1–12

¹ At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus; ² and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” ³ For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, ⁴ because John had been telling him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” ⁵ Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet. ⁶ But when Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod ⁷ so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.” ⁹ The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; ¹⁰ he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. ¹¹ The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother. ¹² His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.

We have had debates in the Cathedral Office, about whether we should rename this service. ‘Beheading’ sounds so brutal, and we wondered if that title might put people off? We could call it, “The Death of John the Baptist”, after all, that is what we are commemorating. And yet, the story of John the Baptist’s head being served up on a platter, is such a graphic image, it is a part of our language. To be ‘served up on a platter’ means to be powerless to alter one’s doomed fate. Whether it is the psycho-sexual account of Salome’s dancing, or the ‘Game-of-Thrones’ like brutality of Herod’s court, this story remains attention-grabbing and memorable.

And maybe ‘beheading’ is the right word for our brutal times. It was not long ago, that ISIS put on video, live executions, beheading their victims in the most callous and inhuman way. What was most perverse, is that it was done in the name of Allah, of God: it was a terrible perversion of humanity, a perversion of Islamic faith, a perversion of the very name of God.

Just this week, a group being called ISIS-K bombed civilians & soldiers outside Kabul airport. What a brutal reminder of how cheap human life is for some.

Perhaps it is not unexpected after 20 years of war, and after years and years of political failure to act for the people of Afghanistan. Just two days ago, in this Cathedral, Captain Ben Macdonald, having served in Afghanistan, reminded those present about some of the cost of this war. What will haunt him for the rest of his life will not be the battles and danger he faced, nor the colleagues he lost (and living with those memories will be hard enough), but it will be the senseless killing of school children by terrorist bombings, the very children to whom they helped with providing an education, an opportunity now denied them in death.

So this evening, as we commemorate the beheading of John the Baptist, we do so mindful of the metaphorical beheading of a nation, a beheading of the people of Afghanistan; remembering the distress among our service personnel and defence forces as events unfold in Afghanistan, especially among those who served in Afghanistan, or the families of the 41 young Australians who died in that war; remembering the refugees forced to flee, and those unable to escape yet are in danger of their lives.

Last week there was a striking photo published which captured a helicopter hovering above the American embassy in Kabul, ready to evacuate diplomatic staff from the city. It's this image, more than any other, that has inspired comparisons between events in Afghanistan and the fall of Saigon in 1975. And it's easy to see why. The image is eerily similar to photographs showing the evacuation of American diplomats after the Vietnam War. There are significant differences between the end of the Vietnam War and the war in Afghanistan, but there are also similarities. Afghanistan bore the marks of all wars.

I am a huge admirer of Ken Burns' fine war documentaries. His most famous was his first documentary series on the American Civil War which he produced in 1990, and he followed it up with another on WWII. His latest one about the Vietnam War is brilliant. The brief description about the documentary says How America, "day by day, decision by decision, fell deeper into a war later described

as a quagmire.” In the history of the war, time and again, there were opportunities for the war to be stopped, and the killing to end. Just like in the First World War, there were constant opportunities for leaders to decide to go no further, but instead, they decide to continue to sacrifice the lives of soldiers and civilians.

The documentary is graphic and confronting. It details how everyone gets it wrong at one time or another throughout the war, Ho Chi Min wanted an end to colonial rule so that Vietnam could be for the Vietnamese, and his righteous doggedness was always underestimated by the more powerful nations, whether that be the Colonial French, the Communist Chinese & Russians, or (the documentary’s particular concern) the Americans, especially their Government & Military. That deep longing for independence was never properly understood, and was one of the reasons that a third-world army could deny victory to the most powerful army in the world? But the integrity of all the players, at one point or another, become compromised:

- the vacillation of Lyndon Johnson to his advisors,
- the fall into ideology of the Hanoi Leaders,
- the duplicitousness of Nixon and Kissinger more concerned with presidential elections than ending the war,
- the hateful speech of the anti-war demonstrators towards returning vets,
- the soldiers on both sides who were asked to fight an unwinnable war, some of whom lost their way and committed atrocities,
- military leaders who were more interested in body count than strategic advantage,
- the corruption of the South Vietnamese leadership who were more interested in clinging on to power than good governance of the people,
- the atrocities committed against POW’s and their own civilians by the leaders in Hanoi.

The results of the War were catastrophic for the people of Vietnam. In 1995, Vietnam released its official estimate of war dead: as many as 2 million civilians on both sides and 1.1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong fighters. The US Military has estimated that between 200,000 and 250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers died. 58,148 Americans died, and 304,000 were wounded; Australia had 521 deaths and over 3,000 wounded out of the 60,000 who served. It wasn't one head that was served up on a platter, it was millions. And this ignores the billions of dollars that America spent on the war, which could have been spent on the social programs that Lyndon Johnson was wanting to introduce.

Such is the cost when leaders get it wrong, when leaders make promises they should never make. And when leaders realise (too late), that they shouldn't have made those promises, they do not repent and do what they should do, because their pride and hold on power prevent them.

Perhaps then, this story of John the Baptist's death might give us cause to pause and reflect? But does this story say something more than, 'Twas ever thus?'

Just like Mark's Gospel, Matthew places this account right after Jesus goes to his home town in Nazareth, and is rejected. And immediately after this story of John the Baptist's death, Jesus feeds 5,000 people: nobody is rejected from that feast, nobody leaves hungry. Unlike the feast in Herod's palace, where only the privileged eat, Jesus feeds everyone. Unlike the feast of Herod, full of duplicity, hypocrisy and power-games, the feast of Jesus models servant leadership, and self-giving love— everyone is invited, the hungry are fed, people serve one another, and a new community of peace and justice is formed.

It would be easy to respond to this story and say, "What has this to do with us? This is about the big people, the politicians, the powerful, the big end of town, the leaders of nations. But Matthew's Gospel is written to us, the followers of

Jesus. It invites us to emulate Jesus, to hear his teaching and to follow his example, to be ready to live the life Jesus calls us to.

So this feast of the Beheading of John the Baptist calls us to do better. John the Baptizer called the people of God to repentance, to a greater integrity of life, to prepare for Jesus' coming. But more than that, we realise we will never live with the perfect integrity John calls for. This story is also about the reality of the moral landscape we have to work in. While God calls us to live lives of integrity, and that is a good thing, our integrity will not win our salvation: for that is already won. The more important question is, 'How do we go on when our integrity as individuals or as a community has failed?' This is where the Good News of God really makes an impact. We go on because God raises us up, even when we fail.

This is true, even of the failure of the Vietnam War, or of the failure of Gallipoli, and I hope it will be true of Afghanistan also, though it is too soon to know. I believe it is true of every tragic theatre of human events and human failure. Geoffrey C. Ward, the author of *The Vietnam War*, concluded his 18-hour film with these words:

The Vietnam War was a tragedy, immeasurable and irredeemable. But meaning can be found in the individual stories of those who lived through it, stories of courage and comradeship and perseverance, of understanding and forgiveness and, ultimately, reconciliation.¹

We live in a messy world of human complexity. But as followers of Jesus, we can make our lives a story of courage and comradeship, perseverance, understanding and forgiveness, and ultimately, reconciliation. When we answer Christ's call, our life will never be meaningless or worthless. In the voice of the Risen Christ, we hear Jesus' encouragement to stand up for the vulnerable, against those who want to belittle others, because of race, religion, gender, or sexuality, or stranger or refugee, or any other difference. We feel the will of Jesus helping us build

¹ Geoffrey C. Ward from *The Vietnam War*, a documentary by Frontline Films. 2018.

communities where everyone is fed, all are invited, where respect and tolerance are its hallmarks, where we do not think more highly of ourselves than we ought, where the wounded are healed, and vulnerable protected. I think the members of the Order of St John will know just what I am saying here, for they seek to emulate those values of chivalry, that look out for the weakest and protect the vulnerable.

God calls us to speak to truth to our leaders, every day and in every way we can, and to anyone we can. For the message of the new community of Christ is an attractive one, people want to hear about that, deep in our hearts we all long for it. And when we followers of Jesus fail to live up to what we preach, and, yes, we will fail, Christ forgives us, and renews us, and feeds us, and gives us what we need to keep going, and to never give up. This is the Good News that John pointed to and died for, fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. May it be true for our lives and the lives of those trying to make sense of the human tragedy of Afghanistan. Only time will tell.

In Christ's name. Amen.