

*Good morning everyone,*

*It is difficult to draw 'good news' out of this Sunday's (Sixth after Trinity) Gospel reading about the execution of John the Baptist. Like the Passion of Jesus, it presents us with the consequences of speaking the truth to power. It is a further reminder that in the world of the New Testament, violence by the imperial power and its collaborators was a normal part of life.*

### **Amos 7: 12 – 15**

Amos is the earliest of the prophets whose preaching and utterances are contained in book form (c. 750BC). The original united kingdom of David and Solomon's time is now divided into two separate kingdoms – Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Amos is from the southern kingdom but has been called by God to go and prophesy in the north.

Among several visions that Amos experiences, in today's passage he sees the Lord standing beside a wall, with a plumb line in his hand. (A builder would always check that a wall was vertical with a plumb line, and if it was not true he would destroy it). The Lord has tested the 'wall' that is the people of Israel and has found them to be corrupt and untrue. Therefore, he vows to destroy them and bring an end to their royal sanctuaries and dynasty.

Amaziah, the guardian of the 'state religion,' tries to silence Amos, regardless of whether he considers Amos' prophecy to be right. He also complains that Amos has no right to prophesy in Israel, because he is demoralising the people. In any case, he is an outsider, a southerner, so he should go home and prophesy there. Amos protests that he is simply obeying God's call to come to the centre of crisis, the spiritual front line. God's word is not always palatable and popular, sometimes it requires someone sent from far away to deliver it, and a good preacher or prophet needs a thick skin as well as a tender heart.

### **Ephesians 1: 3 – 14**

Several, possibly six, of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul were probably not written by the apostle himself, and the style, theology and language of the letter to the Ephesians has prompted most mainstream scholars to conclude that this is one of those from a later 'school of Paul' writing in the apostle's name. Also, many early manuscripts omit the destination of this letter, so it is widely thought to be a kind of baptismal manifesto written to everybody in general and to nobody in particular.

Our passage today which follows the opening greeting is a single long sentence written in a typical Jewish style which prepares the writer to celebrate the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles later in the letter (see 2: 11 – 22). The verses represent a sweeping vision of the Church as God's choice from the beginning and God's intention that Christ's people live holy and irreproachable lives. The sacrificial death of Jesus is shown as all part of God's plan leading to abundant grace being poured on God's people. This plan extends to the whole of creation being gathered into Christ. Christians, living in this hope and sustained by the Holy Spirit who is the assurance of greater blessings to come, are called to praise God through their living, which has a divine and world-transforming purpose. This is a wonderful message of hope and encouragement to a fragile Church living within a pagan and hostile culture and political environment.

## **Mark 6: 14 – 29**

This reading represents a dramatic interlude filling the gap between the sending out of the disciples on their mission (last Sunday's reading) and their return. It provides a catch up on the fate of John the Baptist whose arrest by Herod Antipas is recorded in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel providing Jesus with a trigger to begin his own ministry. The execution of John is certainly an historical event, but it is here set within a tawdry and shocking tale that was probably the stuff of village gossip. It includes a royal divorce involving a king marrying his brother's wife, a queen's wrath, a king's birthday banquet, a dancing girl, a rash royal promise, and the head of John the Baptist being delivered to the banquet on a platter.

Much of the narrative is likely to be Mark's own creation inspired by Old Testament sources such as the wrath of wicked queen Jezebel who wanted the prophet Elijah slain (1 Kings 19), and Esther's banquet to expose the evil intentions of Haman which results in his execution (Esther 7). There are also resemblances to a well-known story in the Mediterranean world of a Roman official granting the wishes of his lover in having a prisoner beheaded at a banquet, an account recorded by the historians Cicero and Livy.

Herod Antipas was called a 'king' by custom but was only a vassal prince permitted by the Romans to rule over a third of the kingdom originally ruled over by his father, Herod the Great (died 4BC). His proper title and role were tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. According to the first century Jewish historian Josephus, Herod put John to death to stop his influence over the people leading to a rebellion. Herod had a curious respect for John, and his fear at the beginning of this passage appears to be that Jesus is John raised from the dead.

Mark clearly wishes to show certain parallels between the fate of John the Baptist and that of Jesus, especially how both were put to death at the insistence of others, how both deaths were ordered by reluctant and spineless authorities (Herod for John and Pilate for Jesus). Jesus saw himself in some sense as continuing what John had begun. John's execution highlights the risk or danger of both the task and the message in speaking God's truth, whether to secular and hostile power or corrupt religion.

*Almighty God, you called your servant John the Baptist to be the forerunner of your Son in birth and death: strengthen us by your grace that, as he suffered for the truth, so we may boldly resist corruption and vice and receive with him the unfading crown of glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Every blessing for Sunday and the week ahead,

Love and prayers,

John