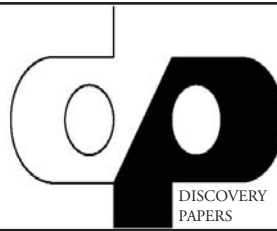


A PROPHET FOR ALL SEASONS

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Scott Grant
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Does the church of Jesus Christ have a role to play in the public square? Some followers of Jesus say the church shouldn't get mixed up in politics. Others say that God was instrumental in the creation of the United States as a "Christian nation" and that the church, therefore, should penetrate the so-called "wall of separation" between church and state.

Consider the story of Sir Thomas More, the sixteenth-century English statesman and devout Catholic, who stood up to King Henry VIII by refusing to endorse his divorce from the queen. In the film *A Man for All Seasons*, Thomas Cromwell, one of the king's advisors, implicitly threatens More with torture:

"You threaten like a dockside bully," says More.

"How should I threaten?"

"Like a minister of state—with justice."

"Oh, justice is what you're threatened with."

"Then I am not threatened."1

The film, with its hagiographic portrayal of More, is one of my favorites. It inspires me to stand up for justice even when doing so could be costly. It's a film for all seasons.

The film's portrayal of Thomas More bears a striking resemblance to Mark's portrayal of John the Baptist. The cinematic story of Thomas More and, more importantly, the biblical story of John the Baptist before it, remind us that as followers of Jesus Christ, we have a role to play in the public square. But what is that role? Consider the story of John the Baptist.²

Mark 6:14-30

14And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him." 15But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!"

17For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. 18For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; 20for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy

listening to him. 21A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; 22and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." 23And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom." 24And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." 25Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 26And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. 27Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, 28and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. 29When his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb.

30The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught.³

The death of a prophet

Jesus has made some enemies in the region of Galilee who oppose his vision of the kingdom of God. Mark now reports that Jesus has also come to the attention of Herod, who rules the regions of Galilee and Peraea under the aegis of Rome. By referring to the partially Jewish tetrarch as "King" Herod, Mark is contrasting him with Jesus. Herod wanted to be recognized as king, but Augustus, the Roman ruler, refused him the title. Mark grants Herod the title but in an ironic way, for Herod falls woefully short of what would be expected of the Jewish king. Mark has already hailed Jesus as the Son of God: the king of the Jews (Mark 1:1). Herod, an insecure ruler, would be on the alert for any threats to his rule, such as Jesus of Nazareth, who has preached about the kingdom of God, cast out demons, and healed the sick, and who sent out his disciples to do the same.

Some say that Jesus is the prophet Elijah, who was taken up to heaven and was expected to return as a herald of the new age (Malachi 3:23-24). The preaching and miracles of both Jesus and his disciples mirror those of Elijah. Others deem him a prophet without necessarily connecting him to the new age. Herod and others opt for the wildest ex-

planation: Jesus is in actuality John the Baptist risen from the dead. Jesus' connection to John and news that Jesus raised a girl from the dead may lay behind such speculation (Mark 5:41-42). Herod's reasons for believing that Jesus is John also have to do with his insecurity as a ruler and his guilty conscience: he executed John. In verses 17-29, Mark brings us up to date by telling the gruesome story of the execution of John the Baptist.

Herod imprisoned John because John castigated him for marrying Herodias, his brother's wife, in violation of the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 18:16, 20:21). One of the roles of a prophet in Israel was to confront kings with the word of God when they strayed from it. John's rebuke implied that someone who fancies himself king of the Jews had no business behaving in such a manner. John, with his lonely yet lovely voice from the wilderness, stood up to the powers of the world. By rebuking Herod, John marked himself out as a threat to the ruler's aspirations. Herodias wanted John killed, but Herod, who enjoyed listening to John, resisted, fearing divine retribution for putting a righteous man to death.

At Herod's birthday party, Herodias' daughter dances for Herod and his guests. Mark leaves much to the imagination, but his description evokes images of a stag party well lubricated with alcohol. That this is an all-male party is evident in that the girl has to go out to see her mother, who is positioned elsewhere. The word translated "girl" in verse 22 is the same word that is used of a twelve-year-old girl in Mark 5:42. Herodias' daughter may have been older, but she probably was not much older. The prophet intrigued Herod, but Herodias' daughter does more than that: she brings him—and the rest of his male guests—pleasure. She pleases Herod so much, in fact, that he vows to give her up to half his kingdom.⁴

In verse 21, Mark describes the day of Herod's party as "strategic." In verse 24, we find out that the day is strategic for Herodias, who has been seeking John's death. Vindictively, she counsels her daughter to ask not simply for the death of John but for the head of John. The girl has no qualms about the request, for she quickly approaches the king. She wants the king to act at once, apart from reflection and before sobering up, to give her not simply the head of John, as per her mother's charge, but the head of John "on a platter." It's as if she is asking for the head of John the Baptist to be served up as the main course at the banquet. Herod, though sorry about the prospect of John's death, capitulates, not having the backbone to stand up to the girl and not wanting to embarrass himself in front of his guests by violating his vow.

John pays with his life for announcing the kingdom of God and holding one of its supposed leaders to account. John's disciples risk a similar fate when they come for the body of the prophet, but they are able to take it away and place it in a tomb. John is dead, but his memory lives on in the conscience of Herod. In the narrative, the speculation that Jesus is John risen from the dead points forward to John's future resurrection and vindication.

Herod comes off as a pitiful excuse for king of the Jews: he married his brother's wife, allowed his stepdaughter to debase herself in front of him and his cronies and then lusted after her, offered up half his kingdom while neglecting the kingdom of God, acted impulsively rather than thoughtfully, and violated his conscience (such as it was) by executing a man he knew to be "righteous and holy." Herod is no better than the pagan kings.

The prophetic vocation

The rulers of our world today not only include leaders of governments but also leaders of both corporations and academic institutions. Who has the power to effect more change in the world: United States senators or Silicon Valley CEOs? Who has more power to influence our world: state legislators or local educators? For each question, the answer might be a toss-up.

Many rulers in our world, like Herod, abuse their positions for their own pleasure and remain vigilant against any threat to their shaky hold on power. Many of them perceive the gospel, which proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord, to be a threat. After all, if Jesus is Lord, then a ruler of this world isn't. And if Jesus has followers who are more concerned with obeying him than the rulers, then some rulers start to worry. To them, Jesus, whether they believe he is real or not, is a potential rival. Many of them want to rule on their own terms without being bothered by matters of justice. Still, many of them, like Herod, can't quite shake justice from their minds; they're intrigued by it and haunted by their failures to abide by it.

Richard Nixon, the thirty-seventh president of the United States who resigned from office in the wake of the Watergate scandal, gave evidence of being haunted by his failures when he told interviewer David Frost in 1977, "I let down my friends. I let down the country. I let down our system of government and the dreams of all those young people that ought to get into government, but think that it's all too corrupt. ... I let the American people down, and I have to carry that burden with me for the rest of my life."

For some of those in power, who have become accustomed to getting what they want, sex is one of the perks. With such a mindset, they make themselves vulnerable to being manipulated by those, like Herodias, who use sex to get what they want. In some cases, even young girls, like the daughter of Herodias, become pawns in the game of power and grow up to believe that they're valued only for their sexuality. In the end, when power, sex, and alcohol mix, impulsiveness overpowers reflection, rulers lose their appetite for justice, and they serve up injustice on a platter. Even outrageous miscarriages of justice, such as the execution of a prophet, become cause for celebration if they serve the interest of power. None

of us has to think for very long to come up with examples of people in power who have sacrificed their families and entire careers for the sake of sexual gratification.

Who are the rulers of the world? They're governmental officials, corporate leaders, and educators, yes, but they are also, especially in view of a culture that exalts the individual, all of us. You rule your own life. For the most part, within certain boundaries, you can do with justice what you will. None of us is impervious to the temptations that befell Herod. Each of us faces a choice—actually, a series of choices throughout a lifetime. What will we do with justice? Many of rulers of the world—and yes, many followers of Jesus—start out standing for justice but end up falling in the way of Herod. It's important that we stay close to Jesus and side with justice because the church, like John, has a prophetic role to play in our world. Nothing undermines the church's prophetic mission like those who talk like John the Baptist in the day but live like Herod the Tetrarch at night. Tragically, the names of church leaders who have sacrificed the reputation of the kingdom of God for the sake of sexual liaisons spring to mind just as readily as the names of secular leaders who have likewise fallen. The all-too-common contemporary stories of sexual failure, both secular and ecclesiastical, should awaken us to our own susceptibility and make us all the more attentive to our relationship with Christ. Such attentiveness extends to what we look at on the internet.

Our prophetic role involves both affirmation and critique: applauding the rulers of our world when they side with justice and reminding them of their calling when they don't. We should praise God that we live in a country whose leaders, for the most part, value justice and challenge corruption. Unlike many countries in our world, it matters here whether or not the governor of a state seeks to profit from filling the U.S. Senate seat vacated by the president-elect. It matters whether an executive at Fry's Electronics gets kickbacks. It matters whether a New York financier runs a \$50 billion Ponzi scheme. We should be thankful not only for those who toil to bring charges against corrupt leaders but also for the right to a fair trial accorded to such leaders. We should praise God for George W. Bush and Barack Obama, who are engineering a peaceful and amicable transfer of power.

But we should also hold our leaders to account when they disregard the poor, the unborn, and the environment, for example. Where we have a voice, we should speak out, with wit and wisdom, against sexual exploitation in marketing, the glorification of violence, and the pursuit of the dollar at all costs. We might wonder whether followers of Jesus were in position to speak out against sketchy dealings that took our entire financial system over a cliff in 2008 but who remained silent because of fear or because they were profiting from such dealings. We should confront those who advocate torture as a means of interrogation. We should applaud the leaders of Google who say, "Don't be evil," but we—especially those among us who work there—should also remind them of those words if they fail to live by them. We should not be surprised

if some rulers in our world deem us a threat. Most of us want to be liked, but our call, like that of John, may lead us into arenas where standing up for justice means losing friends—maybe even a job. We may have to pay a price for playing the role of the prophet, though no one's likely to chop off our heads—not literally, anyway.

Though we may at times be shunned, God may see to it that we live on in the memories of those we confront, the way John lived on in the memory of Herod. In any event, we can trust that God will vindicate his people and their prophetic calling—if not now then in the resurrection from the dead.

Thomas More paid the ultimate price for speaking up against Henry VIII. After mounting the steps to the scaffold on July 6, 1535, he declared, "I die his majesty's good servant, but God's first." Like a prophet, he affirmed the king but also stood up to the king. With that, the executioner's ax fell, and Thomas More was beheaded. His memory, though, lives on, not least in plays and films. The king cut off his head but couldn't silence his voice. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are servants of the world, which involves submitting to our government and blessing our employers—but we are God's first. As such, we have a prophetic role to play in our world—a world which needs our help, both our affirmation and our critique.

Echoes of Esther

The story of the beheading of John the Baptist echoes the book of Esther, which features a Jewish woman who, providentially, became queen of Persia. King Ahasuerus granted Haman, the leader of the princes of Persia, the authority to kill all the Jews of the land. Those who entered the king's presence without being summoned were routinely executed, but Queen Esther courageously approached the king, and he granted her an audience. Esther asked that both the king and Haman attend a banquet. At the banquet, King Ahasuerus, foreshadowing King Herod's words to his stepdaughter at the banquet, asked Esther, "What is your petition, for it shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom it shall be done" (Esther 5:6). In the presence of the king, Esther, unlike the daughter of Herodius, spoke on behalf of her people. The king executed Haman, the enemy of the Jews, and granted the Jews permission to defend themselves. The Jews proceeded to annihilate their enemies. The Feast of Purim commemorates these events.

Yes, the story in Mark echoes the story of Esther, but in a foreboding way. In Esther, a righteous woman finds favor with a king; in Mark, an unrighteous girl finds favor with a king. In Esther, the scheming enemy of God's people is executed; in Mark, the scheming enemy of God's people wins the execution of a righteous prophet. In Esther, God's people are saved when they rise up to destroy their enemies; in Mark, the story of John's beheading doesn't give us much hope for a good ending. The story in Mark is the Esther story in reverse. At this point in Mark, we might be expecting not the salvation of God's people but their destruction. Mark seemingly prepares us for the worst. In

so doing, he hooks us: we wonder what will happen to the hero of the story and his quest. So we read on.⁵

Portents of Jesus

In the next narrative sequence, Jesus, an entirely different kind of king than Herod, throws a banquet of his own, feeding 5,000 men in the wilderness. Herod, at his banquet, “gave” the head of John to his stepdaughter, but Jesus, at his banquet, miraculously “kept giving” bread and fish to those who gathered to him (Mark 5:41). Likewise, in an upper room in Jerusalem, Jesus “gave” his disciples the bread and wine that symbolized his body and blood (Mark 14:22-25).

Herod told his stepdaughter, “Ask me for whatever you want, and I will give it to you.” Jesus, when approached by two of his disciples when they were traveling to Jerusalem, said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” The disciples wanted to reign with Jesus in his glory. Jesus told them that they could expect to suffer. Herod threw a party literally for his “great” men and the “first” men of Galilee, but Jesus, responding to his two disciples, said, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their *great* men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become *great* among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be *first* among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:35-45). Mark, in contrasting Herod with Jesus, is showing us what a real king looks like: a real king serves others, not himself.

Mark’s depiction of Herod foreshadows his depiction of Jewish leaders. The leaders were afraid of Jesus, just as Herod was afraid of John (Mark 11:18, 32; 12:12; 14:2). Nevertheless, a “strategic day” came for the leaders to do away with Jesus, just as it came for Herodias to do away with John (Mark 14:11). Herod asked a girl what she wanted and gave in to her because he did not want to disappoint his guests, but Jesus prayed in Gethsemane for the Father’s will to be done (Mark 14:36). The true king of the Jews submits to the will of God, while the false king of the Jews submits to the will of a dancing girl. Like John, Jesus was seized and bound (Mark 14:46, 15:1).

Just as Herod asked the girl what she wanted, Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, asked the crowd, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” (Mark 15:9). Herodias stirred up her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist; the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask Pilate to release Barabbas instead of Jesus (Mark 15:11). The crowd, in the end, asked for the crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 15:13). Herod was perplexed by John; Pilate was amazed by Jesus (Mark 15:5). Herod was concerned that John, his prisoner, was a righteous man; Pilate was concerned that Jesus, the prisoner before him, had done no evil (Mark 15:14). Herod capitulated to Herodias and her daughter; Pilate capitulated to the high priests and the crowd. Herod reluctantly ordered the execution of John; Pilate reluctantly ordered the execution of Jesus. Herod’s

executioner beheaded John in prison; Pilate’s soldiers crucified Jesus at Golgotha.

Just as John’s disciples courageously “came and took away” the body of John and “laid it in a tomb,” Joseph of Arimathea courageously “came,” asked Pilate for the body of Jesus, and “laid Him in a tomb.” The story of John the Baptist raised the possibility of a resurrection: Herod and others believed that John had been raised from the dead. The story of Jesus actualized a resurrection: when the women came to the tomb of Jesus, it was empty (Mark 16:1-8).

The story of the death of John the Baptist, then, moves us forward: toward the wilderness, along the road to Jerusalem, and on to the upper room, Gethsemane, Pilate’s palace, Golgotha, the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and out beyond to a new world. It points forward to a better salvation than the one that Esther wrought. Queen Esther saved God’s people by enabling them to slaughter their enemies. King Jesus saves God’s people not by arming them, as many would have wished, but by letting the rulers of this world do their worst to him. He didn’t slaughter his enemies; they slaughtered him. However, God vindicated him by raising him from the dead and enthroning him “so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11). God saves all who submit to his Son, not just temporarily from the onslaught of human enemies but eternally from Satan, sin, and death. The Feast of Purim, then, is assimilated into the Feast of Passover, which becomes the Lord’s Supper.

Mark, by echoing the Book of Esther, linking John’s story to that of Jesus, and contrasting the king of the Jews with the pitiful pretender to the throne, leads us in the way of the Lord until he finally takes our breath away with a climax that we couldn’t have imagined in our worst nightmares or wildest dreams: Christ crucified and Christ resurrected, the salvation of the world.

The way of the Lord

What a story! Mark writes, employing echoes and portents, indirection and reversals, not simply to lose us in a good story but to weave a good story—a true story—into us. The question for us, then, is whether we want to join the story: the Esther story, which gets taken up into the John story, which gets taken up into the Jesus story. For the story beckons us to follow Jesus and walk with him in the way of the Lord: giving our lives away, because he gave his body and blood; serving others, because he came not to be served but to serve; submitting to Father’s will, because he cried out in Gethsemane. And if, in following him, we arrive at our own Golgotha, where in our agony somehow the love of God kisses the pain of the world, then we can be confident we’ve taken the right path. The way of the Lord is the way of victory—victory over evil—even if it is disguised as the way of defeat. For the path leads not just to Golgotha, but out beyond—beyond the tombs and graveyards of this world and on into the bright light

of a new world, where evil has no place.

If we walk with Jesus in this way, we may get ourselves in trouble with the rulers of this world, but no doubt some of them will at least scratch their heads in puzzlement—like Herod, who wondered about John, and like Pilate, who wondered about Jesus. People are watching.

Rising to the challenge

As followers of Jesus, do we have a role to play in the public square? Yes. What is it? In part, it's prophetic, involving both affirmation and critique.

President-elect Barack Obama has chosen Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, to give the invocation at the upcoming inaugural. Some observers are especially perturbed with the choice in light of Warren's support of Proposition 8, which defined marriage as between a man and a woman. Barney Frank, a Democratic congressman from Massachusetts, said, "I am very disappointed by President-elect Barack Obama's decision to honor Rev. Rick Warren with a prominent role in his inauguration."⁶ Others are upset because they think Warren is tacitly endorsing—and allowing himself to be used by—a so-called "liberal" president. Nicole Russell of the *American Spectator* writes: "Holding a forum forcing Obama to discuss his views is one thing. Supporting him publicly by praying/speaking at his inauguration is another. Frankly, this is a spineless move on Warren's part ..."⁷ I have no way of peering into two men's minds to know who's using whom or if anyone's using anyone. I've never met Rick Warren, nor have I gotten around to reading his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, one of the best-selling nonfiction books of all time, but it seems to me that he may be a prophetic voice in our land today. Many rulers in this world are listening to what he has to say.

Warren's words have special credibility because of a conversion of sorts that he underwent in 2003. He said he heard God tell him, "You don't care squat about the sick and the poor. And you need to change; you need to repent."⁸ So, he reoriented himself to address global poverty, health care, and illiteracy. One may take issue with his methodology, but Warren's reorientation is in keeping with a biblical understanding of the gospel, which is concerned with bringing God's healing, loving rule to the world. The fact that he and his wife, Kay, give away ninety percent of their income doesn't hurt his credibility, either. From afar, it seems to me that Rick Warren is walking in the way of the Lord. Some rulers of this world, not to mention a host of the church's opponents, are scratching their head in puzzlement because they thought they had evangelicals like Rick Warren pegged.

May we, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, rise

to the challenge and assume our prophetic vocation in the public square, affirming and critiquing, applauding and reminding. In so doing, may we walk in the way of the Lord—giving, serving, submitting to the Father's will—so that our prophetic voice may resonate with the hope and pain of the world.

NOTES

¹ *A Man for All Seasons* (Highland Films, 1966).

² Mark sandwiches the story of Jesus' sending out his disciples around the story of John the Baptist. John's story reminds us, despite the stunning success of the disciples, that following Jesus comes with a price. Mark weaves stories of eating into his gospel in Mark 6:14-8:21. From a biblical standpoint, eating is not simply refueling or enjoying the taste of good food. Something deeper happens when people share meals together.

³ Literary structure:

A Herod *heard* of Jesus, assumed John had risen (14-16)

B Herodius *wanted* John put to death (17-20)

C Herod to Herodius' daughter: "Ask me for whatever you *want*" (21-23)

C' Daughter "I *want* ... the head of John the Baptist" (24-25)

B' Herod literally did not "*want*" to refuse her (26-28)

A' Disciples of John *heard* and laid John in tomb, anticipating resurrection (29)

⁴ The expression "half my kingdom" is proverbial, not literal. Herod, as a vassal of Rome, had no authority to give away any of his kingdom.

⁵ The story of John, Herod, and Herodias also echoes Elijah's interactions with Ahab and Jezebel. Mark's depiction of Herod echoes the Old Testament picture of Ahab, an evil Jewish king, just as his depiction of Herodias echoes the Old Testament depiction of Ahab's wife, Jezebel, who incited Ahab to do evil. The prophet Elijah, like John, rebuked both king and queen. Jezebel sought to kill Elijah, just as Herodias sought to kill John (1 Kings 19, 21). The connections between Elijah and John support Jesus' later implicit announcement that John the Baptist represented the predicted return of Elijah (Mark 9:11-13).

⁶ *The Huffington Post* (huffingtonpost.com, Dec. 18, 2008).

⁷ *The American Spectator* (spectator.org, Dec. 17, 2008).

⁸ David van Biema, "The Global Ambition of Rick Warren," *Time* magazine (August 7, 2008).