

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost 11 July 2021

Amos 7:7-13 / Psalm 85:8-13 / Ephesians 1:3-14 / Mark 6:14-29

It may seem in church lately like we've been hearing readings that feel like God's calling us, inviting us, sending us out. As though we're all modern-day disciples or prophets!

Last week, we also heard how Jesus was a flop in his hometown. He could do no deeds of power there, because the people who "knew him when" felt like they didn't need his help, or they didn't believe he could possibly have that much power, and so they blew him off. Saint Mark used that story to set up Jesus sending out the disciples for the first time, to spread the word and heal while relying on the hospitality the world might offer them.

This morning we had an unusual Gospel reading where we got to see another kind of world. It was a long story by Saint Mark's standards. It even had a flashback, like a movie or video that shows the ending first, and then fills in the story of how it came to be. Maybe strangest of all, Jesus didn't even appear in this parable, this story.

And what a story. We had a hint of what was coming from our first reading, when the prophet Amos ran into trouble doing what we call speaking truth to power, telling it like it is. We can see that bearing witness to truth can be dangerous for prophets and people of

God alike. This is borne out in our gospel's backstory of how John the Baptist has come to be killed by Herod, who now fears that this powerful guy Jesus might even be John returned from the dead.

Yes, it's a wild story. Daytime or nighttime soap operas, telenovelas, *The Game of Thrones*, they have nothing on the story we just heard of betrayal, political intrigue, seduction, and plots.

For John the Baptist, speaking truth to power means telling Herod that it was not okay to marry the divorced wife of his younger brother in order to get a stronger claim to the throne. So Herod has John arrested and locked up, only to find that 1. he's afraid of John, because he knows him to be righteous and holy, and 2. it turns out Herod *likes* listening to him. Perhaps because John's righteous and holy.

But at a banquet in front of lots of VIPs Herod promises his daughter anything, and she asks him to kill John. Herod's afraid to renege on the promise he made in front of everyone, so he has the prophet killed.

The melodrama aside, there's no moral to the story here; the Bible wasn't written to teach kids to behave or to help us get ahead in life. It's a book that tells the truth about who we

human beings are in both our glory and our shame, and it tells the greatest truth, of God's love for humanity and God's commitment to redeem and save us, even from ourselves.

Parables in the Bible don't outright judge; they offer a contrast. So we get to see what life is like with Jesus within the world in which he's active, versus what life is like without him, caught up in structures of power and insecurity and exploitation.

We see how the rich and powerful are used to getting what they want, how they're willing to do almost anything to hold onto or add to what they've got. We see how those who stand up to them or dare to inspire people to imagine a different life usually get trampled on. That's what happens to John. And we know that Jesus' own clash with this same Herod is coming, not that far in the future.

Herod's kingdom, the kingdom of our modern world, is dominated by the desire for power and influence over others. Competition, fear and envy are everywhere, not just on soap operas or reality TV but also the evening news, where they're reported as if there's no other way for people to live in the world and relate to each other.

The reign of God in Jesus, in contrast, is what we've been hearing about in Saint Mark's gospel. It centers on how Jesus is determined to free God's people from whatever keeps

us from abundant life, be it possession, disease, isolation, discrimination, or even death.

Jesus responds in compassion to all who ask for help.

When he sent the disciples out, in last week's Gospel, they went without money or provisions, vulnerable and dependent on the grace and hospitality of others, bringing healing and mercy with no expectation of reward. And in the next few weeks we'll see, once the disciples return, Jesus heal and feed crowds of people in blessing and astonishing abundance.

So it looks like we have a choice: which kingdom do we want to live in, or at least to which one will we give our final allegiance?

It's easy to give the knee-jerk answer: Jesus' kingdom, of course. But we need to remember that while grace and mercy and sharing lead to abundant life, they can also make you feel open to punishment or being taken out of commission.

And if we give ourselves over to the world of power, we'll never feel completely secure. If we accept power – wealth or influence – as the most important thing in life, it can always be replaced by something with more power. It's a never-ending contest with no winners.

That may not be the way we want to live our lives or conduct our relationships with others.

In Jesus' kingdom, the kingdom of God, there are no winners or losers because there are just children of God. All beloved, all welcome, and all deserving of love and respect because God values every one of us.

When Saint Mark describes Herod's brutal, self-serving behavior, he's showing us the world we live in, too. Herod's actions aren't that far from the manipulations of power we see today, with dissidents poisoned by governments, autocrats praised for the sake of appearing strong, children taken from their parents in the name of law and order.

Without the intervention of Jesus Christ, we fall into the same illusions about power and security, leading us to believe the end justifies the means; that might makes right, that it's okay to bypass justice and mercy so as not to appear weak.

Herod actually beheads John to save face rather than admit that he made a foolish promise.

We are invited in today's Gospel to see the world we live in as it is, to be contrite about our participation in it, and to commit to living like Jesus, in the light of God's promises.

All Jesus' miracles make big differences in the lives of the people who experience them, but they don't change the fundamental nature of the world people live in.

Only the cross and the resurrection do that.

We are assured in our second reading today that as people blessed by Christ, adopted as God's children, and marked by the seal of the Holy Spirit, we can indeed praise God's glory and face down the tyrants of this world.

For in Jesus' kingdom, we have life, love, acceptance, and purpose.

Called to hope through Christ's resurrection, we can face our daily challenges with courage and confidence, knowing we will make a difference for those around us as we witness - like the prophets, like the disciples - to justice and mercy.

So to him together with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.