

Herod: The Cause of Our Unbelief Exposed

Welcome this morning. Today we look at a fascinating story and that is the story of Herod and particularly, or the area we're going to be focusing on today is Herod's treatment of John the Baptist.

Herod had John the Baptist executed, and we're going to see today that that execution represents an inner process which, whereby the Word is cut off from us due to our obsession with the senses or the appearance of the senses. The story can be viewed in two ways. It can be viewed as, certainly as a lesson as to what occurs when we don't follow or lead our lives in accordance with the truth that we know.

The other side to this story is that in terms of the progression through the Gospel, it is the growing insight that a person who follows the Lord, who obeys his Word, gains into the way that the hells operate at that level of the senses. And so through seeing that, a person is able to be separated from it. So just be aware today, as we go through this story, of its own application to your life.

This morning's reading is from the Gospel of Mark Chapter 6:14-29.

Now King Herod heard of Him, for His name had become well known. And he said, "John the Baptist is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him." Others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is the Prophet, or like one of the prophets." But when Herod heard, he said, "This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead!" For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. For John had said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." Therefore, Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, but she could not; for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief men of Galilee. And when Herodias' daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who sat with him, the king said to the girl, "Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you." He also swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." So she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist!" Immediately she came in with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And

the king was exceedingly sorry; yet, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took away his corpse and laid it in a tomb.

The cause of our unbelief exposed. We've been following the life of Jesus and the disciples, and we've seen that Jesus has come into his own country. We saw that a few weeks back where He struck unbelief and was unable to do any powerful works there. And then we saw how He went about teaching. And then He sent out his disciples two by two and He gave them authority over unclean spirits, and they healed people. They healed them and anointed them with oil. But here the scene abruptly changes because we are dropped into the domain of a king named Herod. So that prior focus suddenly shifts. And we are focusing now on another series of events which seems somewhat detached from those that had preceded them in the Gospel.

Now, prior to this, if we just recap a bit. The Lord's response to that unbelief was that he went in a circuit teaching. Now to teach is to make evident truths, that's what teaching is. And those truths were being made evident by the Lord because of this unbelief because it's by means of truths that we are able to overcome states of unbelief. It's by means of truths that we can gain mastery over the unbelief that arises from the lowest aspect of our nature that would try to convince us that the things of the Word are not true, but that the appearances that we see, the things we perceive with our senses, these things are true. But the whole of the Heavenly Doctrines is dedicated to showing us that this is not in fact the case. That the appearance of things leads us astray. And that we need truths in order to guide and direct our lives and our decision making. Without the giving of the Lord's truths through his Word, we are totally lost. The human race has no way of coming or drawing any useful information about God from within itself. It needs revelation. It needs the Word,

And we've looked at the reality of this unbelief in the statement the Lord is the Word. But another example of a false idea generated by our senses is that life is something that originates in us. We are the source of it. This is a powerful, powerful appearance. And it can only be counted by the truth that life flows into us. We are recipients of it. Despite how things appear, despite how we feel. The truth is that life flows in. We are recipients of that life.

Now, this appearance that life is something inherent within us is spoken about many, many times in the works that make up the teachings of the church. But in the Arcana we have this statement, the Arcana Coelestia 5084 says this:

It is an illusion of the senses when a person believes that he lives independently, that is, that an underived life is present within him; for this is what the situation seems to be to the senses. The senses have no conception at all that the Divine alone is one whose life is underived, thus that there is but one actual life, and that anything in the world that has life is merely a form receiving it.

These appearances we have seen can have a powerful hold on the mind. And as such, they do have very real consequences on how we see ourselves, how we see others, which in turn will have a direct bearing on how we function in terms of our relationships with others.

Again, from the Arcana, from the same paragraph:

[2] Few know what the illusions of the senses are and few believe that these cast a shadow over rational insights and most of all over spiritual matters of faith - a shadow so dark that it blots them out. This happens especially when at the same time what a person delights in is the result of desires bred by a selfish and worldly love.

That selfish and worldly light shuts out the light of heaven. It is the realm of the senses that is the realm of unbelief concerning spiritual realities. The Heavenly Doctrines teach us that if the many appearances of the senses, if they are to be held in check, then we need to use truths that their false conclusions may be cast out.

Again, from the same passage of that Arcana reading:

Sensory impressions are said to be cast aside when the things that are first and foremost in explanations place no reliance on them; for they are indeed sensory impressions, and impressions received by the mind directly through the senses are illusions. The senses are the source of all the illusions that reign in a person, and they are the reason why few have any belief in the truths of faith and why the natural man is opposed to the spiritual man, that is, the external man to the internal. Consequently if the natural or external man starts to have dominion over the spiritual or internal man, no belief at all in matters

of faith exists any longer, for illusions cast a shadow over them and evil desires smother them.

We'll see this with regard to Herod today.

Now it's because of the way these illusions work and our tendency to believe them, this is why the Lord after being constrained by the unbelief of those in his own country, then went about teaching. For us, if we are to progress spiritually, it is important that we take time to get to know what these truths are. These truths that are able to counter the false conclusions that our loves based on the senses seek to continually confirm within us.

This is an integral part of our spiritual work. This confirmation of truths within the developing spiritual mind is represented in the disciples being sent out two by two. For truths to be effective, they must be put into action. And it is by means of this effort to align our lives with what we believe to be true from the Word, that leads to the casting out of many unclean spirits. You see unclean spirits in the Word refer to the false ideas or illusions we have been talking about that arise up out of that sense level of life, that sense level of thinking and feeling.

Now, we also read that many were healed by the disciples after they anointed them with oil. This speaks of the healing of inner things; the things about thinking, getting the right perspective of feeling, of having the right sort of loves. And this healing occurs through loving actions, both loving action in terms of our attitude towards our own self and towards others and the loving action of others towards us. These things are those within which the Lord is present. Oil, you're aware, is soft and has soothing qualities. Therefore, it corresponds to goodness or love or loving actions.

We now come to this story of the beheading of John the Baptist.

How is this story connected to the unbelief Jesus encountered?

And how is it connected to Jesus sending out the disciples?

And where does it fit in terms of the spiritual processes being illustrated?

Well, the spiritual sense of this story opens up for us in a wonderful way - the inner condition that gives rise to unbelief.

The first thing to realize about this account regarding John's beheading is that in the literal sense we are told that the event has already occurred. It is a recounting of what Herod had done in response to him thinking that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead. So, on the surface it would appear that Mark is filling us in on the basis for Herod's conclusion that John the Baptist had indeed risen from the dead. We know, from what is said here, how John died. What is current as far as the Gospel story goes is that the reputation of Jesus had reached the ear of this degenerate king. From the account of Mark's Gospel, we don't actually know in the chronological, historical event sense when the beheading actually occurred. We know that it occurred on Herod's birthday but we don't know where in the sequence of events his birthday falls. We also know that John had been imprisoned sometime before. What we can say is that the events that occurred regarding Herod and John were occurring in parallel to the activities of Jesus and his disciples.

Think about it like this. At the moment you're present in church. Hopefully you're attending to what you can learn from the story. But you may have something planned after the service and part of your mind is also attending to that. I want you to take a moment to think about what you intend to do after today's service.

Now take a moment to return to the story of Herod and the Word.

What you have just done is switch between the spiritual and natural levels of your mind. The quality of the thoughts associated with each level, or degree are very different. And what you'll notice is that when you are in one level of thought, the other level becomes unconscious. But both are always present, bubbling away, influencing your interior states. And they do that whether you are conscious of them or not. And we often have the experience of something breaking into our thought from another level. You'll be listening to my voice and you'll find that your thoughts will drift to other areas of your life. Then you may catch yourself thinking about whatever it is that has occupied your mind for that space of time. This then causes your focus to turn once again, to bring your attention to what is being said. Perhaps some specific thought today will impact on you as you listen. You go from here, perhaps you go and do some shopping and as you walk around the mall looking at various displays, the thought returns and you are occupied with it for a little while.

In both cases, thought from a different level has broken into your consciousness. In the first case, thoughts belonging to the natural level of life

have drawn you away from thoughts belonging to the spiritual level. And in the second case, spiritual thought as you are walking around that mall, has interrupted natural thought.

Now, the reason for our ability to shift in our thinking is because our mind is divided into different levels. And these levels are described in the Arcana 5145(2) this way.

Interiorly the human being is divided into separate degrees, and each degree has its own termination that serves to separate it from the degree beneath it. This is so with every degree from the inmost one to the outermost. The interior rational constitutes the first degree, the degree in which celestial angels are, that is, where the inmost or third heaven is. The exterior rational makes up the second degree, the one in which spiritual angels are, that is, where the middle or second heaven is. The interior natural makes up the third degree, the one in which good spirits are, that is, where the last and lowest or first heaven is. And the exterior natural...

This is the one I want you to just keep in mind.

And the exterior natural, the level of the senses, makes up the fourth degree, in which man is.

That's us.

Now all these levels of mind that are described here operate in parallel. There's something going on in them all the time but we are only conscious of the lowest level while we are in the body.

And these levels are separated by discrete boundaries. These boundaries are represented in different ways in the Word because the Word is about teaching us as to the structure of the human mind and how the Lord operates within it. Here in our story today, we see one way of illustrating this spiritual structure of discrete degrees.

And it's illustrated by this technique of suddenly throwing us into what, at least on the surface, appears to be a story that has little relationship to the preceding account of Jesus's life. It is a parallel story. And we saw the same technique used in the healing of Jairus's and its relationship to the woman with the haemorrhage. You're dealing with different levels, but they are connected.

Two seemingly unrelated events on the surface, that is Jairus and the woman with the haemorrhage, but we saw they are intimately related in terms of understanding those things from a spiritual perspective. The stories of Jesus dealing with unbelief and His sending out of the disciples on the surface seem unrelated to this story of John the Baptist's beheading. Yet like the story of Jairus's daughter and the woman with the haemorrhage, they are closely related from a spiritual perspective.

What we have with Jesus's response to unbelief, that response He encountered in those from His own country, we had the teaching and the sending out of his disciples. And that's an illustration of a process whereby the core aspect that gave rise to the unbelief is exposed. The ruling causal aspect of states of unbelief, represented by those of Jesus's own country, is found in the story of Herod. It's what underlies it. And we are slowly being brought into a position where we can see it and appreciate how it operates.

The unbelief of those of Jesus's own country represents our growing awareness of the existence of unbelief at one level of our minds. What is now required is for its cause to be exposed. This cause sits at a more unconscious level of our mind but through the effort to live the truths we know; these deeper-rooted elements are exposed. This is revealed in the story of the beheading of John. Two stories, two levels of being in a single mind, that mind being our own. So, we see that there is more to our minds than perhaps we have previously thought.

But what I want to draw your attention to is that level of mind described in the previous quote as *the exterior natural, the level of the senses that makes up the fourth degree*. The fourth degree, the lowest degree in which we are because this relates very much to what Herod represents. Herod in the gospel of Matthew is given the title of *Herod the Tetrarch*. Now 'tetrarch' is fascinating in what we are looking at today because 'tetrarch' means *ruler, chief or head of a fourth*. As a king, he clearly represents a ruling principle. As all kings in the Word do. And given now what we know concerning the meaning of the word 'tetrarch', we can see that spiritually he represents the ruling principle that governs the fourth degree, the degree of our senses. This is Herod. And if we take a good look at Herod we can come to appreciate what this level of life is really like.

What is now described is the root causes of unbelief in regard to spiritual truths. The senses were created to serve the spiritual, not to rule it, and where

they rule, darkness prevails and truly spiritual things cannot be. Truth must be applied to purify our affections and thereby raise us out of the dominion of our senses into the rule of love, heavenly love.

Now, there is perhaps no description of a character more degenerate in the Gospel than that of Herod, a man who put away his lawfully wedded wife to take the wife of his half-brother Phillip to himself. Now it's interesting that her name is Herodias, which is the feminine form of Herod. And not only that, but she was Herod's step-niece. So, this incestuous union speaks volumes as to the operation of the love of self. The union of Herod with its own feminine form Herodias is surely a powerful metaphor of loving self above all else. He loved himself in her. That's why they have the same name.

The sense level of mind is full of wanton indulgence, yet even at this level, the Lord has made it possible so that truth can be seen. For we read that Herod recognized John the Baptist, being a man of Godly character, but he imprisoned him because he didn't like what he had to say. But Herod still consulted with John, and gladly we are told, he consulted with John. When he needed advice, he'd bring John out, speak to John, get the advice he needed and then put John back in prison. I wonder how much of this reflects the way we treat the Word because John is of course, if you remember right back to our first look at the gospel of Mark, John represents the literal sense of the Word.

So, Herod recognizes John but of course as we have seen many times, mental acknowledgement is not enough. John the Baptist is the forerunner of Christ, even as our understanding of the literal sense is the forerunner to understanding the spiritual sense of the Word. But John represents the literal sense of the Word and it's our obedience to the literal sense of the Word that our external life can be cleansed, particularly our obedience to the ten commandments. John, we were told in the first chapter of the Gospel, preached the baptism of repentance to all who would heed him. Verse two corresponds to the activity of the literal sense of the Word in our minds whose purpose is to expose those unlawful unions we have with affections of our lower. And John, or the Word also challenges us to put our life in order.

Now the unregenerate will represented by Herodias has nothing but the utmost contempt for anything that would seek to restrain its expression. Thus, it works to destroy all that is good and true. And in our story today we see that

it is seeking to render ineffective once and for all, all truth that remains in this mind, drawn from the literal sense of the Word.

So, Herod indulging in lower passions, yet wanting, perhaps even torn between the residual ideas of right and wrong that he inherited from his upbringing, still seeks to consult the truth, still seeks to parlay with John the Baptist. But there's a problem you see, he doesn't heed what John says. For when truth is not used to purify our affections, the Word becomes bound, bound in its ability to do its work of redemption within us. Thus, it is cast into prison. The prison of our justifications and the fallacies we invent to excuse our unloving behaviours and addictions. The result of a refusal to deal with our evils brings about a situation where we ultimately can no longer even recognize the nature of the affections that dance in our minds.

The nature of those things that excite and stimulate us to the point where we would give all, all that we have even to half our kingdom in return for the pleasure and the delight they give us. These lower lusts of the senses flow from a corrupt will and it's quite literally hell bent, seeking to bring an end to what little influence truth has left in such a mind. The new church teaches that the understanding can see truth, can even be elevated into the light of heaven. But if that truth is not used for purifying our affections, the daughter of Herodias, it always falls back to the level that the corrupt will exists in. Herod was king, but Herodias ruled.

This story shows in the pure simplicity, the process of the corruption the hell's employ. They captivate the mind through stimulating our affections, which is the dance of the daughter. At a critical point, the thoughts are turned to the object of the mind's delight. And there is a giving over of the understanding to the desire. Drunk with desire, the mind cannot see the consequences of its actions. Through this affection, the understanding is bound to its root, the love of self. The affection only seeks to please its source. This is the daughter going to the mother, for we see that the daughter consults the mother, the affection consults the will the corrupt will. And the understanding represented by Herod can only follow its dictates. In fact, if you think about it, it's the same story that takes place in the garden right at the beginning of the Book of Genesis. For the understanding is the servant of the will, which if not purified, that will will indeed corrupt the whole person.

The order is then given, and John is beheaded. Our reading says that Herod ordered his executioner to do the deed but in fact the Greek word is not

'executioner,' it actually means *'lifeguard.'* The lifeguards are the rationalizations and understanding that, under the dictates of a corrupt will, conjures up to lessen the impacts of conscience and protect that life that delights in the indulgences of the sensual level of mind. These rationalizations ultimately render a death blow to the influence truth can have on our lives, delivering it into the hands of a corrupt will. This process is illustrated powerfully in the words from New Testament Epistle of James, which states.

A person is tempted when they are drawn away by their own desires and enticed. Then when the desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is full grown, it brings forth death.

So, in the story of Herod's beheading of John we find the cause of our states of unbelief, which believing the appearances of the senses over what the Word teaches. This story is told in hindsight, and as such, indicates the growing insight on the part of a person who is faithfully following the spiritual path. It illustrates their insight into spiritual causes. It also gives us a clear teaching regarding our state if we wilfully refuse to follow the dictates of our conscience in preference to gratifying the lower loves of self and the world.

Amen.