



## A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

10<sup>th</sup> November, 2023

Our 'walk-on' this weekend may better be described as a '*dance-on!*'...

*...the daughter of Herodias came in and danced...*

Mark 6:22

The girl is unnamed in the gospels, but Jewish historian Josephus names her as Salome. Her dancing, and subsequent demand for the head of John the Baptist, have been a gruesome subject for painters; and Richard Strauss made an opera of it, with its balletic 'dance of the seven veils'. We don't know how old Salome was, a "*girl*" (6:22b) young enough to seek and take her mother's advice. Herodias hated John for condemning her adulterous relationship with Herod (v.18-19); -this was her chance for revenge (v.21,24). Herod was trapped by his rash promise, not wanting to lose face (v.26).

This story is loaded with overtones: abusive use of a child, sexual suggestion, and the devastating effects of jealousy and pride. Matthew hints at Jesus' grief at his personal loss (14:12-13a).

What can we learn from Salome? Less from her than from the adults surrounding her: Herod, Herodias, the dinner guests..... and John.

1) Her step-father, Herod, (Antipas, 20BC–39AD) wanted to impress and titillate his guests, and was probably drunk, to make such a promise (Mark 6:22-23). Having done so, little thinking of what the child might ask for, he has a dilemma: -to execute John, whom he feared and admired, and whose execution could bring repercussions (v.20, and Matthew 14:5), or to lose face in front of his guests (Mark 6:21). In days when lives in the hands of despots were cheap, John lost. We need not look far into the despicable behaviours of some modern counterparts to see the murderous depths to which people will sink to maintain power and not 'lose face'.

2) Herodias, the girl's mother, was infuriated by John's condemnation of the divorces and remarriage that led to her being (perhaps in fulfilment of an ambition) the wife of Herod (Mark 6:17-19). Her response (and Herod's -Matthew 14:5) is to 'shoot the messenger' or, as we hear so often today, to dismiss the challenge to something wrong and to make our own truth. (*This is not to imply that divorce and remarriage are always wrong, but it was for them, check the historical circumstances!*)

3) The dinner guests (Mark 6:21) were people whose support Herod needed and who could do him damage if he broke his oath (v.26). (Comparisons with the Kremlin or the Knesset are tempting.) Furthermore, it doesn't take much imagination to suggest that Salome's dance was salacious, and that the wine had no doubt had an effect. It all exemplifies the underside of politics through the ages and up to our own day.

4) John is the only one who comes through with silent dignity and godly witness. It seems that Herod was haunted by him, perhaps remorseful over whole despicable business (Mark 6:14, 20; Matthew 14:2). Like martyrs down to the present day, John's death did not silence his witness. As the ancient writer Tertullian said, "*The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church*".

On Remembrance Day weekend, we remember the fallen in all conflicts, and those, like John, whose Christian witness puts them under threat at the whim of evil men today.