

Matthew Round / General

Matthew: Christ The Promised King / Disappoint; Suffering; Injustice / Matthew 14:1–12

John meets an unjust and tragic end at the foolish whim of a weak leader distracted by a party - yet John was faithful and a great prophet ("none greater born of women"). How are we to respond to such ignominious injustice? What are we to expect for our own lives?

Intro me

Perhaps you might remember this picture from 2015: ISIS, the Islamic Fundamentalist group kidnapped, and then beheaded 21 Coptic Christians. A vicious evil and a horrible tragedy. A senseless end to 21 lives, poor migrants working overseas in Libya in order to send a little money home to their families.

I am sure that none of them set out from home with this end in mind, that none of them planned their final journey to be to that beach, their final act to be to kneel and to die. But they died for refusing to renounce Jesus and convert to Islam, died as heroes of the faith. Their names were added to the Orthodox church and Catholic church's official books of martyrs so they'd be remembered and honoured by more than just their own families.

I don't know what I would do in their shoes. I'd like to hope I'd be ready to die for my faith too - but until I'm staring that in the face, what do I really know? .. Martyrs, heroes dying with their faith intact; not just that, dying for confessing their faith, knowing it would likely cost them their lives.

Why do I begin with a story like this? **Today we're going to be looking at** a very unusual slice of the Gospel of Matthew, the ancient telling of the story of Jesus - unusual because it's the only story in the whole gospel not directly concerned with Jesus. And it's a story of a senseless end, like these 21 martyrs.

Thing is, those martyrs are remembered for their daring faithfulness in the moment of trial, a public faithfulness which cost them their life; horrible though it is, there's something glorious about that. Today's story features something that seems even more senseless.

But this story isn't preserved in our gospels by accident; it's here on purpose - with intent; so that we might read it and think about it. So that God might speak to us through it. So this is what we're going to look at together this morning. I know it's not a cheery setup, but I think this story has profound things to say to us.

Matthew 14:1–12 NIV

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him." Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John

had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her." Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet. On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

Well that's a story, right? If you know it already, you're missing the shock value for sure. It's a shocking story. And here's why it's shocking:

First, **John is a key guy**. This is not just some minor character getting eliminated, you know, the one who shows up in the credits as "elevator guy number 3" or the like, someone you hardly knew was in the story and you won't miss.

If you were with us as we started into Matthew's gospel quite a while ago, you will have met John before - he shows up a couple of times as the prophesied forerunner to Jesus, paving the way, blazing the trail. And Jesus has **some very positive words** to say about him:

| Matthew 11:11 (NIV)

| Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist

No-one greater among those born of women - that is, like, everyone.. And yet this is his closing act.

But second **John is doing the right thing**. Now there's a lot of opportunity to get confused with this name Herod because there's a whole family tree full of people named Herod kicking around in history and in the Bible. This particular Herod isn't the baby-killing one who shows up earlier in Matthew's gospel if you know that bit of the story - but still, on Santa's naughty-to-nice list, he is very much at the naughty end of the spectrum.

And it seems pretty clear that lots of people knew Herod as a baddie busy doing bad things; lots of people thought he should change his ways - but they were careful to think that well behind his back, well out of earshot. John, it seems, was rather more direct.

The particular thing that John calls him on - which lands John in prison - is taking your brother's wife. **Mt 14:3-4** Doing that when both you and she were already married, when both spouses are very much still alive; that's definitely out of bounds in Jewish morality - and this Herod was, at least in theory, playing as Jewish.

Matthew 14:3-4 NIV

Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful

for you to have her.”

And it didn't just upset Jews: Herod's first wife was so upset her dad went to war with Herod over it - but that's another story. What I want us to see is that *John is doing the right thing*: bluntly rebuking this Herod, a powerful king, in order to turn him around - because remember John's **central message**, recorded for us earlier in this gospel: Mt 3:2

| Matthew 3:2 (NIV)

| “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

That is, sort your life out; *turn* from the wrong way you have been going, living; *turn* to the right way - because time is running out. John isn't just bad-mouthing Herod, giving him a hard time; he wants Herod to change - to change not just so they'd have better government, but to change for Herod's own good.

So we've got the key guy, and he's boldly doing the right thing - what should happen? Well, a turnaround story, right? An amazing plot development where baddie turns goodie and rescues everyone from certain disaster. Instead we get a long slow downhill; John is languishing in prison - he was there back in chapter 11; it's been a while. Unjustly imprisoned, ok, that's bad.

And then you get this **totally senseless end**. It's Herod's party - he can cry if he wants to - but instead he's living it up with a big crowd, putting on a big show. Probably totally forgot the long list of people he's locked in prison. It's gotten to the bad karaoke end of the evening and his wife's daughter from her previous marriage does a funky dance. No doubt a little worse for wear on wine, Herod makes a foolish promise he instantly regrets - and he's manipulated by his wife into ordering a sudden and grisly end to John to save face.

And that's it for John. The curtain comes down, end of story.

It's probably not a mega-surprise that John is going down. He's called the king on his sin. Most of the time that doesn't end well. But there's something just so incidental about the way it happens; no heroic battle with an army of false prophets on a mountain top. No big show trial with one last chance to declare and demonstrate the rightness of your cause, the injustice of your situation as you're carried away before a crowd. Not even a last moment to dare to truly own your faith, knowing the price, and go out with honour like those 21 we started with.

Just a weak and manipulated king's drunken order to save face, and a private, hasty, grisly chop - and that's it. Righteous John dies. Wicked Herod lives - and lives on.. we'll encounter him again later in Jesus' story. We can trace his life onwards in history. It's not mega glorious - he never becomes Emperor or anything - but his story continues, seemingly none the worse for his part in this.

A key guy doing the right thing meets a totally senseless end. His followers pick up the pieces. Literally, I guess. And his enemies just stroll away, nonplussed. It's outrageous. It's meant to be outrageous. This is huge injustice.

So **where is God?** Where is God in this? If you're asking that question, it's a good question. It's right to wonder that. More to the point, **what is Jesus doing** while all this goes on?

His miraculous powers are in full flow as our reading started - that's why he comes to Herod's attention. He's known where John is for a while, now - heard he was in prison back in chapter 11. Clearly Jesus has the sort of power which could open prison doors - you'll see that in action in the book of Acts, the story of the earliest Christians. Just the flick of a wrist and that'd be done.

Why, Jesus has the sort of power which could even put John's head back on if he was late to the party. That would be an epic-level miracle, the sort of thing that would really get people's attention. But no miracles for John, just a dead end.

John heralds this coming kingdom, this idea we've been talking and thinking about for a while now, only to .. just get mown down, seemingly ignored. In the last few weeks, we've heard this Kingdom grows like a mustard seed from tiny to a huge tree; this kingdom advances even though hidden, like yeast mixed into dough; we've learned this Kingdom is treasured, worth everything - more than the most precious pearl. Where's the growth, the advance? How is this treasuring it?

This is pretty bleak, right? Not an uplifting, encouraging story. Probably not the sort of thing you were hoping for this morning. Hardly a good sales pitch for this whole Christianity thing.. So why is this story here?

Three big things for us here today: First: **this is not the whole story.** If this was the whole of John's story, it would be exactly as senseless as it's seemed. We'd be totally baffled by God's apparent inaction, by Jesus' apparent inaction. John would be out like a light without even the honour of a faithful last stand and that would be the end of it.

If this was the whole story, it'd be an absolutely rubbish story. That'd be like reading Harry Potter only to close the book with Harry locked in a cupboard under the stairs before the letters arrived. Or turning off Star Wars with Luke stuck under the surface of the trash compactor. Oh well, the end. Except, spoiler alert - it's not.

This is not the whole story with John - **because this is not the end of the story.** This life we're living is so big in our eyes, in our experience, it's so easy for us to live like it's everything. Like where we get to and how it ends is everything. Like we have to get everything in, everything must be resolved, explained, addressed. But this is not the whole story.

So much of the world around us lives in a panic, obsessed with their own story, focused on the mark they must make in life. So much of the world around us would absolutely agree John's story is senseless - *and fear their own story might be too.* Maybe that's you here today. Fearing your life might all come to nothing. Pointless. A random, senseless end. Listen, this life is short, we don't know where it's going, and we don't know how or when it's going to end. If that makes you afraid, that's pretty reasonable - *if that's the whole story.*

And I think the truth is for many Christians we're so close to believing this life is the whole story we can find ourselves in basically the same spot. Will I ever amount to anything? Ever achieve anything significant? Make my mark? And what if I don't? What if it isn't all resolved in this life? Was it all for nothing? Pointless? Senseless?

This is not the whole story. When we don't get. When things aren't working. When it seems like all is lost. Sometimes we just need to wake ourselves up, tap on the cheek, and remember this is not the whole story.

Second, **our disobedient world will reject those God sends to it.**

John is not the first prophet to be rejected by those he was sent to, to meet this fate. And he won't be the last. There's a long story in our bibles of **God reaching out** to His people again and again, holding out his hand of peace towards them, calling them back to His ways, His path. Is 65:2

| Isaiah 65:2 (NIV)

| All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations—

Later in our gospel, Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem **and declares:** Mt 23:37

Matthew 23:37 NIV

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

Our disobedient world will reject those God sends to it. And one of the key things with this story is we're getting a preview, a trailer, for the main event. John, the forerunner, sent to our world by God to call us back, sent to save, is instead **rejected and killed.** Like so many prophets before Him. But also like one greater still **who will follow him:** Jesus, sent to our world by God to call us back, sent to save, instead will be rejected and killed.

Matthew 17:12 NIV

But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands."

This is no surprise to Jesus - he talks about what happened to John exactly as a foreshadowing of what will happen to him. *Our disobedient world will reject those God sends to it.* **But that won't stop Him.**

It won't stop Him because God loves our world so much. John 3:16 is a justly famous bible verse. Here we see what it really means. Our disobedient world rejects those God sends to it - but that won't stop Him - won't stop Him even **sending his precious only son** - because he loves us. This is how we know what love is - Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. For me. For you. For his people.

| John 3:16 (NIV)

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

*Our disobedient world will reject those God sends to it. **But that won't stop Him.***

Christians, this is important for you to know too because God is sending *you* out to this disobedient world. And yes, it will often reject you. And that might hurt - might cost you. But that is not going to stop God sending you. Because He loves this world. We are the ones God is now sending to our world - that's why we go on so much about sharing our hope, about stepping out into our world with the message God has entrusted to us. Yes, our disobedient world will often reject us - but that is not going to stop Him sending us.

And if you're not a Christian here today, it's important we're upfront that this is part of the package - even though it doesn't seem like a good advert for this whole Jesus thing. God's offer to you of rescue, forgiveness and salvation in Jesus comes as a package deal with this sending back into our world - where you may well be rejected by those you are sent to. Not a good deal - if that's all there is to it - but that's why we have to keep remembering this life is not the whole story - because it's not the end of the story.

So **don't be surprised**. Don't be surprised when you meet opposition or hostility. When things you know to be good and wonderful are derided or ignored by others. You're not the first - you won't be the last.

So **don't give up**. Probably none of us will be called to pay the price John did for his faithfulness - but even the small things we face could be enough to stop us in our tracks and turn us back. Our disobedient world will reject those God sends to it, but that won't stop Him sending us in love and hope.

So **don't misread the end**. Like John, you might not win in this life - it might seem senseless - but you weren't fighting for this life. This life is not the whole story because this life isn't the end. Our hope rests on Jesus - risen from the dead.

So **do what matters in the end**. John finished the work given to him, calling out to a disobedient world "repent for the kingdom of God is at hand." Finish the work God has given to you - complete the mission he has assigned to you - calling out to our disobedient world in love. Because that work stretches out beyond this life, beyond all its promise and disappointment. That's what truly matters in the end.

This world is passing away. God's Kingdom is coming. And it's forever - that's what truly matters in the end.

big idea: this is not the whole story - because this is not the end of the story