



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> July 2002  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Mark chapter 6:1-29

**The Word Rejected**

*And he was amazed at their lack of faith* (v 6a).

I think it is quite hard to believe in God today. But, I am not sure it is any harder than in earlier ages. We always tend to look back and think that things were better once upon a time. After all, even nostalgia is not what it used to be. So we think that faith came easily and naturally to our ancestors. Matthew Arnold wrote, in his poem Dover Beach:

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full,  
And round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now, I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

But, if a Victorian poet was writing that 150 years ago, we should beware of thinking that today in 2002 we are experiencing an age that is uniquely hostile to Christian Faith. It has always been hard to believe. There have always been all sorts of obstacles to putting our trust in Jesus, and indeed the 4 gospel accounts of Jesus' life in the New Testament all focus a lot of attention on how people came to believe in Jesus, and also on what sort of things stopped them from coming to believe in Him. It was not so different, and our passage from Mark's gospel today concerns two of them: Familiarity and Fear.

**1) Familiarity, or Using the Known to avoid the Unknown**

vv 1-4

It is not just that it is possible to overlook things which we know too well. I heard once of a family who owned a holiday cottage, where for years they had used a particular lump of green rock for a door

stop to keep the front door open, until a guest once pointed out to them that it was actually a Jade sculpture of a Pekingese dog dating from the Ming dynasty, and worth many thousands of pounds. Sometimes we do not notice a thing's value just because we know it too well. Although, considering the extraordinary shape of those little dogs, I am not at all surprised that no one had recognised that doorstep before. But there is something more than that going on here.

*"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles!"* (v 2b). You see, they were aware of the wisdom of His teaching and even of His miracles (although He did not do many in their presence); but they used their knowledge of His background and of His family to dismiss the implications of His teaching and His miracles. *"Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?"* *And they took offence at him* (v 3). Amazement turned into offence. What they knew about Him, as a neighbour and a kinsman, drowned out any thoughts of Him being something greater.

In fact, this sort of thing kept happening to Jesus. Most of Jesus' contemporaries judged Jesus according to what they already knew: their history, theology, tradition, experience, culture and expectations. Those are all good things in themselves and we are not expected to abandon them. But Jesus is not to be judged by them, as the scribes and Pharisees did, for example. When we encounter God, He does not obliterate our human experience. But, our human experience cannot contain Him. And if we are not open to the possibility of engaging with something, Someone,

beyond our human experience, then we are not open to the possibility of engaging with God. We may claim to have an open mind, but it is really as closed as a High Street bank at midnight—as one student once said to a friend who was talking to him about Jesus, “Look: I’ve made up my mind. Don’t confuse me with the facts!”

The Christian can act in a very similar manner to the unbeliever in this regard: we too can use our history and our theology, our tradition and our experience, our culture and our expectations, to judge Jesus. But actually that is the wrong way around—they are to be judged by Him. Is Jesus allowed to recalibrate my thinking? Am I open to the possibility of that happening each time I read His word? Or is He so familiar to me now that I no longer hear when He says something new to me? I just reinterpret it in the light of what I already know of Him, and conform it to something more comfortable, reassuring and familiar. When did He last say something new to you? Your brain and mine cannot contain Him. He always has new things to say to us. It is said that the besetting sin of the elderly is to think that experience is a substitute for intelligence. Well, one besetting sin of the Christian is to think that what I have already experienced of Jesus is pretty much all there is to experience of Him. I find I’m beginning to slip into that more and more. But we must not let what we already know preclude any fresh revelation from God. Or we will not permit Him to do any new work in our lives because we are not open to it.

*He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith* (vv 5-6a). It is not that Jesus was powerless without the people’s faith. But the purpose of His miracles was to open men and women’s eyes to His identity. Most of these people had taken offence at the possibility of that identity (v 3), and Jesus would not work meaningless miracles. He could not do any mighty works there in accordance with the purpose of His ministry, which was to show people Who He was. They had already foreclosed on that possibility, and more miracles would only have increased their offence of Him.

2,000 years later people today still use what they know to evade what they don’t know; or we use it to conform Jesus to our own pattern for Him, rather than letting Him conform us to the pattern He has in mind for us.

Well, let’s now move from the Home Town, to the palace of the local king, Herod, and consider, not Familiarity but Fear.

## 2) Fear – running away from the path of change

vv 14-29

*King Herod heard about this, for Jesus’ name had become well known. Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” Others said, “He is Elijah.” And still others claimed, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.” But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”* (vv 14-16). At the time Herod must have looked to be a great man. Of all the different figures in the gospel story, here was probably the one who would have had most public attention. His name would have been in the news. His private life would have been in the gossip columns. His palaces would have been haunted by the paparazzi of the Galilean gutter press.

But to us Herod now looks like a frightened fool. He is almost a study in fear—afraid of his wife, Herodias, *For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife”* (vv 17-18). Note—he put John in prison to please her, and then displeased her by keeping John alive. *So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him* (vv 19-20). Afraid of and intrigued by John the Baptist himself, who was such an antithesis to Herod, the straight talker who knew no fear of men. Afraid of being shamed before his birthday guests: Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.” And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom” (vv 21-23). (Of course, the

kingdom wasn't his to give anyway. He only held it as a grant from Rome,) *She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered* (v 24).

Who can blame Herod for being frightened of such a woman? It is not her hatred of John the Baptist that I find terrifying (she knew she could only write her marriage certificate on the back of his death warrant); it is the cold calculation that waited such an opportunity: It is the first 5 words of verse 21 which perhaps are the most unnerving in the passage. And notice it ran in Herodias' blood—do you notice her daughter's addition to her mother's request? *At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter"* (v 25). That would have made an unexpected extra course for the guests of the banquet. I'm almost surprised we do not read of Herod being afraid of his own stepdaughter, as well. *The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb* (vv 26-29).

Afraid of his own conscience—*But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"* (v 16). Herod was wrong to think that Jesus could possibly be John, but he was not wrong to think that John had some link with Jesus. He recognised that God was at work in them both.

And it was God Herod was determined to avoid. His frightened, vacillating weakness may look pathetic to us with our 2000 years of hindsight. But how many of us try to keep God away from our lives in the same way? Herod was fascinated by John, but he had not the courage to face the pain of the changes he would have to make if he took John seriously. You see, it just hurts me too much not to do what I want to do: pursuing my own pleasures, following my own ambitions, achieving what I want to achieve. Oh, we're not opposed to God. We would not deny good and evil. But it is too much for us if we can't sleep with whom we want to sleep with, spend our money on ourselves in our own selfish ways, and live our lives in the way we choose to live them.

When I was in Ireland recently, a Presbyterian minister there told me how he had been asked to take a funeral at which they wanted the Frank Sinatra song 'I did it my way' played. It must have been tempting in the sermon not to say of the deceased, "Well, he may have done it his way on earth, but he's certainly not doing it his way now." Or even—"If he did do it his way on earth, if that was really the theme song of his life, then it is pretty certain where he is spending eternity." There is no one in heaven humming, "I did it my way." You see, that is Hell's national anthem. In heaven they say, "They will be done."

To let God into our lives calls for courage—because it means change, and change hurts, and some can't face that pain. For many it is too frightening and, like Herod, they slip from one prevaricating compromise to another, but always further from God, because God calls us to repent. And so let's now return to the paragraph we skipped, the meat in the sandwich.

### 3) The Urgent and Timeless Message: Repent!—turning from what I know is wrong vv 6-13

But the main point is the extension of Jesus' own ministry: *These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them"* (vv 8-11): they were to go as He went, taking nothing with them, dependent on hospitality, but making it clear that those who rejected them were rejecting God.

*They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them* (vv 12-13). They were to exercise the same authority over demons and disease that Jesus exercised. And they were to proclaim the same message. Jesus had begun His ministry back in Mark 1:14-15 like this: *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"* And it is that word repent which provides a key to the stumbling blocks of familiarity and fear. *They went out and preached that people should repent* (v 12).

For the Home Town to repent called for a mental shift: they had got to make room in their thinking for a Jesus far bigger than they were prepared to allow Him to be. And you and I have to repent in that way all the time: Jesus is bigger than I think He is. And He is bigger than you think He is. And if we want to see God at work, we need to be open to a Jesus far greater than we have yet conceived of. Isn't that a glorious thought?

For Herod to repent he had to face the pain of change to his life. Repentance is much more than being sorry. Herod was sorry for how things had gone. But he would not give up Herodias. And it led him eventually to murder John the Baptist. And there may be someone here who, for the sake of a wrong relationship, will end up just as far from God as that. But all of us have things we need to give up. We have painful changes to make, turning from what we know to be wrong.

Repentance is to turn. It is to turn away from what I know to be wrong (and you don't need me to tell you what that is for you). But to repent is also to turn towards Jesus. Turning away from evil is frightening and painful (Herod couldn't do it). Turning towards Jesus is humbling (perhaps that is why the Home Town couldn't bring themselves to do it). But it is also glorious because in Him we find everything we've ever truly needed. Is it hard to believe?

One vicar was standing at the church door at the end of a service and a woman came out, and said, "Oh vicar, isn't it just so hard to believe?" And the vicar just said "Whom?" "Whom is it hard to believe?"

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*