

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness....." (Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*)

I am sure many of you recognize these words as the beginning of the long, opening sentence in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. I thought of that passage as I read today's gospel reading because today's gruesome story begins to provide us with a tale of two banquets, or more aptly, a tale of two very contrasting kingdoms.

Today's gospel reading is downright gruesome. It is hard to read this Gospel passage and then say, "The Gospel, Good News of our Lord!" It is simply a horrifying story!! The television soap operas of our day, the messy, political dramas and the many stories of betrayal and intrigue we hear by means of today's media have nothing on the Bible. Today's gospel has it all: political conspiracy, seduction, religious fervor, and enough behind the scenes plotting to satisfy the most avid of mystery fans. However, the Bible is a book that tells the truth, the truth about humanity in all of its guts, glory and shame. So, here we have a story that honestly and

aptly describes the kingdoms of this world as we hear of Herod's banquet of death.

Herod hosted a birthday bash and invited a select group of important officials. His wife, Herodias, was there even though she should not have been. Herod had stolen her from his brother. John the Baptist had condemned Herod's unlawful marriage to Herodias. John had spoken truth to Herod and consequently landed in prison. Mark tells us that even though Herod, the **Jewish** tetrarch, had John imprisoned, he liked to listen to John. This is rather peculiar because John was always preaching about repentance. However, for Herod, power and empire had replaced the teachings of Jewish scripture. Anyway, today the gospel writer tells us that, at his birthday bash, he had the daughter of Herodias entertain the guests with a dance. And, Herod was so delighted with her seductive performance he promised to reward the girl with anything she wanted. "Even half of my kingdom," he said. He never would have dreamed that she would ask for John's head. He was grieved at her request - but, his guests had heard his promise. How could he disappoint them? Who knows what the officers might tell someone higher up? So, Herod gave the command, and soon the head of John the Baptist was brought out on a platter, as though it was the last course of the meal. Quite the banquet, a

meal with a very **horrifying leftover**: the Baptist's head served on a gruesome platter. And, the voice that called people to repentance, to turn around and live a new life, was abruptly silenced. Herod could have made a different choice, but the empire had replaced God in his life. The empire shaped his values and his decisions.

It is no coincidence that the gospel writer presents this gruesome tale at this point in Mark's gospel. You see, this story is promptly followed by the good news of a banquet of life where Jesus feeds more than 5,000. The writer of Mark's gospel is very careful about the placement of these stories, wants us to hear these two stories together and be aware of the contrasts. Herod lavishly hosted a select guest list of important officials at his banquet of death. However, Jesus hosts a banquet of life where he feeds 5,000+ people with five loaves and two fish, a banquet of life that is all about abundance. Herod's banquet was for the rich and shameless, while the feast hosted by Jesus is one of mercy where the poor and the outcast were welcomed and fed. Political intrigue and power permeate Herod's banquet, but blessing and surprising abundance characterize Jesus' banquet of life when 12 baskets of food were left over.

Feeding hungry crowds and seeking justice for the oppressed were not on Herod's agenda. He was too interested in maintaining the empire

and looking good. However, the leftovers of empire have almost always been destruction and death--even in the name of peace and security. There always seems to be enough money for weapons, but never enough to feed those who are hungry. And, there is a real danger in speaking truth to power, in naming what is wrong in the world and trying to change it. John the Baptist was beheaded for doing just that. Speaking truth to power can be dangerous business. As we look at this story in light of the role the church plays in society today, we have to wonder if some of us who try to follow Christ have been following too safe a course, sitting back in the comfortable banquet seats our culture has provided. Just maybe we need this awful story to help us ask if we are following the One whose way was full of danger and whose final destination was a cross.

Today's disturbing story reminds us that it's terribly easy to bow down to the ways of empire and the kingdom of this world. In fact, the truth is, we decapitate what we believe when we complacently allow our economic system to be controlled by greed and the kingdom of Wall Street, as we tend to live in awe of the lifestyles of the rich and the famous. We decapitate what we say we believe when we strive to look good among our peers and not risk standing out. We decapitate what we say we believe when we compartmentalize faith into a Sunday ritual that has little or

nothing to do with the rest of our lives and the way we live each and every day.

Yet, into such a world Jesus comes with an alternative vision. "The kingdom of God has come near you," he said. Over and over he taught about it and lived it. When the hour grew late and the 5,000 were hungry, the disciples said, "Send the crowds away so that **they** may go into the village and buy food for themselves." Everything rational shouts, "Good idea!" Herod would have said, "Great idea! Send them away." But Jesus said to them and he says to us, "They need not go away; **you** give them something to eat." Far too often our response is, "Jesus, we can't. You have to understand. Hunger is a very complicated global problem. If we give money to poor countries, corrupt leaders divert donations for their own personal use. The needs are just too immense--we don't know where to start. I don't have the time or the wisdom to figure out what to do. Even if I did, I'm only one person. I have only five loaves and two fish." However, our excuses are no better than those of the disciples! Jesus knew long ago what economists and hunger activists tell us now: we **have everything we need to end world hunger**. Art Simon, the founder of **Bread for The World**, has said, "Each of us helps to decide how our nation should use its power and wealth in a hungry world, each of us."

Our lives are filled with choices. Herod chose loyalty to the empire. He presided over a banquet of death and ruled over a kingdom of death. While this story may tell a brutal truth about humanity, we know it is **not** the end of the story. Jesus called his disciples to make a choice. They could have said "no," for they had only enough to feed themselves. But Jesus called them beyond themselves. They did have something. **And, we** have something. Jesus invites us to live into his banquet of life and Jesus' banquet is all about lavish love and abundant grace. Jesus invites us to live in a way that is in keeping with the **kingdom he** proclaims is at hand. Jesus invites us to speak truth to power Jesus' style, to live welcoming all kinds of people, to move beyond our fears and perceptions of scarcity that are so present in culture. In fact, Jesus invites us live into his kingdom and discover a whole new definition for power, to live into the **power of compassion and love.**

So, come. Come to Jesus' banquet of life. Move beyond yourselves and live into God's kingdom where God multiplies what we bring and there is a banquet of life for everyone!