Sermon for Trinity 6, Sunday 11th July 2021 – at Longden, Pulverbatch and Hanwood by Revd Graham Earney

Ephesians 1.3-14

Mark 6.14-29

In one way or another, we are all used to the concept of ‘flash backs’. They are part of the plot design in the more complicated novels or crime fiction. They are an art form much loved of some ‘Hollywood’ film directors. They even crop up in radio drama.

Flash backs also occur in our personal lives. Those of us of a certain age can remember where we were when President Kennedy was shot – when England won the world cup – when man first stepped on the moon. (It is more recent events that we have most difficulty locating!) We can do something similar with our spiritual lives – where and when we received our first communion – where and when we were ordained or commissioned for a specific office in the church – where and when we gained a new insight into the enormity of God’s love.

Paradoxically, by being here today, we are creating the opposite of a flash back – in cinematic terms, ‘the flash forward’! We are at a Sunday service in Longden church for the first time for more than fifteen months. We presage what is yet to come. With the impending relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions we are on the cusp of the possibility of singing in church again and, if we are daring enough to go back to greeting each other fully with the peace. Is it a risk we are prepared to take? More of the future a little later – in the meanwhile let’s get back to flash backs.

Effectively the whole of this morning’s gospel reading is a flash back. It comes as an unwelcome reflection to Herod Antipas when he hears of the wondrous words and doings of Jesus and thinks it is John the Baptist come back from the dead to haunt him. If fact Mark uses the story as an interlude, an intermission, between the two parts of an ongoing event in the gospel. In the passage before Jesus has sent the disciples out on mission. This story fills the gap before they return to tell him what has occurred.

It is an illustrative story and we shouldn’t get too ‘hung up’ on the small details. One commentator, prompted by an odd comment by the Jewish historian, Josephus, remarks that this was a story which the authorities wanted hushed up, but which was whispered about in the bazaars. It is clear that in it getting to Mark some of the detail had become confused. Herodias was never the wife of Philip. She was the wife of Herod Antipas’ other half brother – also called Herod! And would a king really have allowed his daughter to dance sensuously in front of half-drunk lecherous men? If so, then it was a comment on how depraved leadership had become by then!

What we read this morning is the only story in Mark’s gospel that isn’t about Jesus. That is not to imply that the story has no historical merit, or that it has nothing to say to us. Human nature and motive are at the heart of it. Herod Antipas was driven by vengeance. John the Baptist was mentioned in the first chapter of his gospel as one “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. Mark recalls, “there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem.” From elsewhere in the gospels we are to understand that Herod Antipas was challenged by this and had John put in prison.

Next come a mishmash of motives. Herod wants to seem important and lay on a feast for his guests. He wants something from his daughter, Salome – that she would entertain his guests. He offers her a bribe to perform. Prompted by Herodias, who couldn’t stand John, she asks for the head of the Baptist on a salver. Now Herod experiences the pain of being backed into a corner – he might not have wanted to go as far as killing John, but he couldn’t be seen to ‘lose face’ by going back on his word. Reading this we can make a parallel with the statement of Caiaphas in St John’s gospel’s version of the passion: “it is better for one man to die for the sake of the nation”.

The flash back in our story occurs when Herod Antipas becomes aware of Jesus and how he has become known by the people. Herod became convinced that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead. His conscience made him fear what might be the ramifications of his decision to have John killed to please his wife and daughter. It didn’t bring back John, but we might hope that it informed and changed his actions in the future.

We need to use flash backs in our own lives, individually and collectively as society. We do so individually each time we come to confession. As we did this morning we paused, either before we came to church or in the service, to reflect on the last week. To think of the wrong things we have done and the good ones we have omitted to do. Collectively we need to think as a society about what is truly important to us. As we move out of Covid-19 restrictions what we need to take forward into the new tomorrow as part of our moral compass. And what we want to leave in the past that aren’t so important to us anymore.

Each person carries a ‘mental map’ that helps to guide them through life. We have to recognise that each map is different. Each map will be biased by what people feel is important to them. Politicians’ maps look different to those of scientists, or industrialists, and so on. An example this week: politicians started to talk about ‘personal responsibility’ shifting onus away from government – immediately this was countered by epidemiologists and others saying it should be ‘social responsibility’, a partnership between individual choice and the government giving us all the information. As a former social responsibility officer for the Diocese of Bath and Wells it made me glad and sad. Glad that people were making the moral point and sad because it was not the church making it. There are no easy answers, but at some time we will have to answer the moral question of how many extra Covid deaths are the price we are prepared to pay as the cost of liberating financial activity.

Faith should always be our watchword. In this instance it is that we should move forward with faith as an inspiration. Realistic faith means that we move forward with care so that we are an inspiration to others. In moving onward I can’t resist looking over my shoulder for a last flash back. It is of visits to the Holy Isle of Lindisfarne, a place of faith in more threatening times to our own. On one such visit we picked up a small prayer booklet, “Pocket Prayers for the Creative Pilgrim”. It has short prayers for the Morning, Middle of the Day, and Night Time. I commend one of the morning prayers to you:

May each moment today be filled with light,

May each challenge today be met with grace,

May each choice today follow Your plan

And may I sense Your wondrous presence in all.

As we move out of Covid restrictions let us move forward in faith in God’s name – not for our own sake but to bring light and grace to others so that they may experience God’s wondrous presence in their lives.

Revd Graham Earney