

Pentecost 6B – Proper 10 (7/12/09 – *Caught Between Two Kingdoms*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Have you ever been in Herod's situation? I'm sure you have been! Not exactly, of course – none of us have had anyone beheaded. But we have been in Herod's sandals in a certain sense ... in his predicament. In our *Holy Gospel* for today, King Herod finds himself *Caught Between Two Kingdoms* as it were. And that's just where we find ourselves – *Caught Between Two Kingdoms*.

Herod is interested in excitement and novelty ... in pleasure ... power ... and prestige. These are all things of **this** world ... **this** kingdom. And we see just how these interests get Herod into trouble. First he is interested in the excitement and novelty of having his brother's wife, Herodias – who is, actually, the granddaughter of Herod the Great ... which is to say, his own niece! Then for his pleasure – and for a show of power ... and for prestige in the eyes of those around him – he throws a big birthday party ... complete with dancing girls ... or at least, a dancing girl. And this girl is his illegitimate wife's daughter!

So here we see Herod deeply steeped in the kingdom of the world. He's grabbing for all the gusto he can get. And in an inebriated state – whether by alcohol or by power ... or a combination of both – Herod makes an astounding, “bigger-than-life” promise to his promiscuous step-daughter: *Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you!* This casual promise isn't enough – Herod would have more prestige and honor and glory in the sight of those nobles, military commanders, and leading men of Galilee gathered ... so *he vowed to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom.”* [MK 6.22-23] Now **there's** a recipe for trouble – and trouble Herod gets. This girl knows not what to ask – but she knows where to go to get an answer ... her mother. *And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”* [6.25]

What a perfectly horrible request! But worse ... because Herod is so steeped in the kingdom of the world – so hungry for worldly prestige – he has now placed himself in a very **unenviable** position. Will he do what is right? Will he repent of his promise and spare John's life – almost certainly losing face with his guests in the process ... not to mention angering his wife? Or will he grant his step-daughter's morbid request – compound his sins of lust, adultery, pride, impenitence, and more lust ... by adding murder on top of it all? And don't we likewise find ourselves *Caught Between Two Kingdoms* – confronted with doing what is right, losing face by admitting our sin, and repenting (perhaps even publicly) or compounding our sin by carrying it out so as not to lose the “prestige” of our coworkers or friends?

Now, recall what our text says. John had been a true prophet of God – faithfully proclaiming the truth both of the Law and of the Gospel ... whether it was politically correct or not – and had stated clearly (and publicly): ***It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.*** As a result, ***Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that He was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.*** [6.18-20] Herod has been hearing John – both the condemnation of his sin and the proclamation of the Gospel ... for John preached ***a Baptism of repentance into the forgiveness of sins*** (as St. Mark informs us [MK 1.4]). John's preaching perplexed him greatly – Herod heard John's condemnation of his sin and knew that John was right; yet Herod did **not** repent of his sin ... did not return his brother's wife to him. On the other hand, Herod probably liked what he heard in the Gospel – that sins are forgiven by Christ and through faith in Christ; but because he refused to repent, he could not receive Christ's benefits. **That's** what was greatly perplexing. Herod wanted the blessings of the kingdom of God in Christ – with Christ's healing of the ailments of sin ... the undoing of the malady of death ... and the true glory of forgiveness, life, and salvation that never ends – but he also wanted to live fully in the kingdom of the world and to give in to its lusts and greed and so-called glory.

But we **can't** really live in both kingdoms. More precisely, we can't be **of** both kingdoms. We can't be **of** the world (living as the Christ-less world lives) and **of** the kingdom of Christ (living humbly, denying the sins of the flesh, holding on to the power of Christ's forgiveness in the weakness of our faith). And so Herod finds himself ***Caught Between Two Kingdoms*** – **and so do we** ... since our sinful flesh keeps clinging to this sinful world and yet our spirit keeps clinging to Christ.

There must be a difference, of course, between the way we are ***Caught Between Two Kingdoms*** and the way Herod was. Herod tried to hang on to both – but in the end, gave up the Word of God John was proclaiming by having him beheaded ... and later was complicit in the killing of the Word of God enfleshed when Holy Week came. Herod chose to follow the world and give up Christ. **We** on the other hand must strive to let go of the worldly, fleshly kingdom – while yet remaining in it – and seek and grasp firmly the kingdom of heaven.

Yet we see that when the plumb-line is laid out ... hung down from heaven, as it were – the one Amos saw [AMOS 7.7-15] – we are found to be crooked ... leaning toward sin and death ... we are untrue ... inclined to be unrighteous and unholy. We have not the zeal of John to set aside the flesh and dedicate ourselves fully to the things of God. We have not the faithfulness of John to proclaim the truth in the face of adversity – much less in the face of death. We are sinners ...

and we know it. Again and again we find ourselves *Caught Between Two Kingdoms*. And the only answer to our problem – our sinful problem – is found in the *antiphon* for the PSALM OF THE DAY: *Show us Your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us Your salvation* [PSA 85.7] ... and in the INTROIT appointed for this day (which we did not hear): *For Your Name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life! In Your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble! Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In Your faithfulness answer me, in Your righteousness! Enter not into judgment with Your servant, for no one living is righteous before You. Let me hear in the morning of Your steadfast love, for in You I trust.* [PSA 143.1-2, 8a, 11]

Our only hope **is** and is **in** the One Who **is** straight and true ... in Whom there is absolutely **nothing** that is not right ... in Whom there is **nothing** crooked ... **nothing** sinful ... **nothing** that compromises with the kingdom of the world. Our true and only hope is in Christ – the One John pointed to ... the One the Apostles proclaimed when He had sent them out ... the One about Whom Herod heard ... but did not believe. Our true and only hope is Christ. For He **is** the Lord's steadfast love ... Christ **is** the Lord's salvation – given **to** us out of steadfast love ... given **for** us for our eternal salvation.

It is **in Christ** that our God and Father has already blessed us *with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places* [EPH 1.3] – of which we have a foretaste and guarantee already here as we pilgrimage on earth ... with our true citizenship in heaven. **In Christ** God has chosen us *before the foundation of the world, that we might be holy and blameless before Him* [1.4]. God has chosen you – elected you – so that you might be made and might remain holy and without spot or wrinkle or blemish or any such thing. **In Christ** you have been adopted as sons (... and daughters) [1.5] – which means that Christ has made Himself your Brother ... and you may pray to God as *our Father* as the Lord has taught us. By the **Blood of Christ** you are redeemed – bought back from the kingdom of this world and its ruler to be made citizens in the Kingdom of God [1.7a]. For by Holy Baptism you have been baptized **into Christ's** death – the shedding of His Blood for the forgiveness of all your trespasses *according to the riches of His grace* [1.7b] – and **in Christ** you have been raised up again to eternal life in God's heavenly Kingdom.

But since in this life we all too often find ourselves *Caught Between Two Kingdoms*, let us **not** surround ourselves with “yes men” – who will tell us what our itching ears and lusting flesh want to hear; but rather, let us select as friends and fellow worshippers those who will tell us the truth, even when – **especially** when – we don't want to hear it. Indeed let us gladly *hear what God the LORD will speak* to us [PSA 85.8] – both His indignation for our sin and His promises to

restore us again and to *put away* His *indignation toward us* in Christ our Lord [85.4] ... the promises that **in Christ** and **because of Christ** we have the Lord's peace. For **in Christ** *steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other* [PSA 85.10]. Both the eternal, steadfast love of God and the faithfulness of the Man Jesus meet **in Christ** – He faithfully shows forth the love of God toward us who must dwell in the kingdom of this world and is lovingly faithful in carrying out the divine plan to atone for the sins of this world. **In Christ** *righteousness and peace kiss each other* – the righteousness of God according to which He demands punishment ... indeed, death ... for those who have built themselves crooked according to His divine plumb-line and the peace of God which Christ has won **for us** by taking **our** sin upon Himself and paying **our** debt to satisfy the righteous wrath of God. As sinner-saints, we are often *Caught Between Two Kingdoms* – but **in Christ** rest assured that you will be caught up into that heavenly Kingdom that has no end.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]