
The Prophet, the King, and the Dancing Girl

Mark 6:14-29

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 15, 2012 by Dr. Joel Marcus

One of the good things about growing up in the Chicago area was a wonderful FM radio station, WFMT. This station played mostly classical music; it still does, as far as I know. But on Saturday nights they broadcast what they called their “weekly aberration,” a program called The Midnight Special. This consisted (and still does, as far as I know) of what the announcer described every week in his intro as an assortment of “folk music, showtunes, comedy, and odds and ends.” The program always began with a recording of the great black folksinger Huddie Ledbetter, a.k.a. Leadbelly, singing the prison song “The Midnight Special.” Hence the name of the program. And it always concluded about three hours later, around one in the morning, with the English counter-tenor Richard Dyer-Bennett singing his version of the Appalachian gospel hymn, “Lonesome Valley.”

There was something very comforting about the predictability of this beginning and this end, even though what happened in between varied week by week. If I wasn’t doing anything else Saturday night—which I usually wasn’t—I would listen to The Midnight Special, and try to stay awake to the end to hear Dyer-Bennett sing “Lonesome Valley.” Usually I wouldn’t make it, and would fall asleep, but sometimes I would wake up to the dying strains of “Lonesome Valley.”

And that song was mysterious to me, especially the last verse, which Dyer-Bennet sang passionately and with superb diction:

Some say John was a Christian,
Some say John was a Jew.
But I say John was a natural man,
And he was a preacher too.

And those lines really puzzled me. How could it be uncertain whether this John, whoever he was, was a Christian or a Jew? There was no such ambiguity in the Chicago suburb where I grew up. There, you were either a Christian or a Jew. Most people were Christians, but a minority, including my family, were Jews, though few of us were very religious. The others were Christians, although not all of them went to church on Sunday. But they all seemed to believe in Jesus, and in December they put up Christmas trees and decorated the outside of their houses with lighted Santa Clauses and reindeer and the occasional creche. On Christmas Eve, after our family’s traditional Christmas Eve supper of Chinese takeout, we would pile into the car and drive around the neighborhood to see the Christmas decorations or, in my father’s words, “What the goyim are up to.” There was little ambiguity in this environment; it was almost always clear who was a Christian and who was a Jew.

So I wondered, whenever I heard Richard Dyer-Bennett sing “Lonesome Valley”: how could it not be clear which group this guy John belonged to? The ambiguity intrigued me; and that ambiguity was mysteriously increased by the fact that Richard Dyer-Bennett was a counter-tenor, a man who sounded like a woman. Ambiguity piled on top of ambiguity!

But John himself seems to have been a somewhat ambiguous figure. Was he a Christian, a believer in Jesus, or was he just an apocalyptic Jew? Certainly he was the latter--one of a number of Jews in his time who expected that the world would end soon and that, as part of the endtime events, a savior-figure, a Messiah, would appear on the scene. But did he believe that that Messiah was Jesus?

The Gospels basically answer this question in the affirmative, but they also give a few conflicting signals. In the Fourth Gospel, the Baptist forthrightly acclaim Jesus as the Lamb of God and says, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” But this same Gospel also makes it clear that Jesus started out as part of the John the Baptist movement, and that for a while he and the Baptist carried on concurrent and perhaps competing baptismal missions. The first three Gospels, similarly, give the impression that John recognized Jesus as “the one who is to come” at his baptism, yet two of those Gospels, Matthew and Luke, also picture him from prison, towards the

end of his life, sending messengers to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we waiting for another?” John here seems to be considering the possibility that Jesus may be the Messiah, but not to be sure about it.

And there is other evidence as well. The Jewish historian Josephus gives an account of John’s death that in some ways overlaps with and in some ways differs from that in the Gospels, but he does not link the Baptist with Jesus at all. Similarly, from the New Testament itself we know that there were followers of John who did not follow Jesus, indeed who had never even heard of him. Paul meets some of them in Ephesus in the book of Acts and preaches to them about Jesus. They then convert to Christianity, which is reassuring, but we know that not all followers of the Baptist did so. Indeed, down to the present day, there exists in Iran and Iraq an Aramaic-speaking mystical sect known as the Mandaean, perhaps descended from the earliest baptist movement, who revere John as a true prophet but regard Jesus as a false one.

Who was this John the Baptist, then? He seems, like Jesus himself, to have been a protean figure, whom different groups could appropriate for their own ends. Whatever else he was, he certainly was an apocalypticist—a prophet who announced fiery judgment and the end of the present world-order, and called on his fellow-Jews to repent in the face of this imminent crisis. Troubled times and places such as first-century Palestine always seem to breed this sort of end-of-the-world message, and John was not alone in preaching it. Such a radical message, which seems to challenge the ultimacy of current structures, is bound to feel threatening to the rulers of any age.

And we know that the leaders of John’s time did feel threatened. The impression we get from Josephus, for example, is that Herod Antipas, the ruler of the region in which John was conducting his ministry, saw him as a dangerous person because of his popular following, and therefore determined to get rid of him before his movement turned into an uprising. John, then, seems in Josephus’s description to be a charismatic, even revolutionary figure, something like Nat Turner or Che Guevara—someone capable of stirring up the masses. Herod rightly fears him, and therefore rationally decides to put him to death.

The picture is more complicated in the Gospels, where the issue of John’s revolutionary potential does not come up in connection with his execution, but only his denunciation of Herod’s marriage to Herodias, his half-brother’s former wife, a marriage which John decries as incestuous. According to Mark, our earliest Gospel, this denunciation made Herodias furious, and she plotted to kill John. But Mark pictures Herod himself as trying to protect the prophet who had denounced his conjugal relations. In Mark’s account, Herod is only manipulated into executing John against his will, by the famous erotic dance of Herodias’s daughter Salome—the feature of the narrative that has most captured the imagination of later artists and dramatists. But this picture of Herod being tricked into putting John to death by his own wife contrasts with the picture in Josephus of him as a ruthless tyrant who coldly decides to dispatch a worrisome threat to his power.

So what is the truth about Herod’s view of John? I don’t know, but I do know that Mark’s picture of Herod has a psychological depth that Josephus lacks and that is almost Shakespearean. Mark’s Herod is a man divided against himself. He is perplexed by John, and he fears his spiritual power—and yet he listens to him gladly, against his own better judgment and his own interests, as far as Realpolitik is concerned. Here, then, is more ambiguity. Herod should put John to death—it would be the rational thing to do—but he just can’t bring himself to do it, because he’s so intrigued and befuddled by him. He doesn’t understand John, but he just can’t get enough of listening to him. There is a psychological realism about this description, whether it’s historical or not. It reminds me of the first time I heard the voice of a certain singer/songwriter coming through my radio receiver fifty years ago. The voice was nasal and off-putting, and the words were strange and jarring and scary—they, too, were apocalyptic, predicting that hard rains were gonna fall—but somehow I just couldn’t turn the dial and turn off that voice.

And so it is with Herod and John, in Mark’s description. Herod wants to be done with John, but he just can’t be. There are rare individuals who seem to possess such raw spiritual power that they can cut through the most hardened skins, bringing out the better nature of people whom all the rest of the world has concluded have better nature. And such people may ultimately be more dangerous to tyrants than those who take up the gun against them, since they cause the powers-that-be to question whether it’s really worthwhile to continue doing

what they're doing. One thinks of the marchers who confronted the snarling dogs and the water cannons in Mississippi and Alabama a half-century ago; one thinks of the unarmed young man who faced down a column of tanks in Tianamen Square about a quarter of a century ago; one thinks of some of the voices of the Arab Spring last year.

But, of course, not everybody is touchable, even by such raw spiritual power. Herod's wife Herodias is not, and she ruthlessly arranges things in such a way that John will die. When goodness appears on the scene, some will be touched, against all expectation, but others will experience a hatred so intense that it seems uncanny. I glimpsed such hatred for the first time when I was a college student in the sixties, and its object was the first real Christian I ever knew, a saintly guy who helped me and many others find our way through the lower depths of that tumultuous time. But I once saw somebody else respond to this friend of mine with a hatred that seemed totally over-the-top and impossible to comprehend. I still remember the sneer on this other guy's face and the contempt with which he spoke about my friend; I think he even referred to him as "spiritual," in a voice dripping with sarcasm. Light comes into the world, and darkness recoils and counterattacks.

I am haunted by a photograph I recently saw of Abraham Lincoln delivering his Second Inaugural Address from the Capitol Building in Washington—that speech in which Lincoln sadly suggested that the carnage of the Civil War might be God's judgment on our country, on our whole country, both North and South, for its shared original sin of slavery. Lincoln concluded that speech with an exhortation to move forward with malice toward none and charity for all, even though so many voices were calling for retribution against the South. John Wilkes Booth is clearly visible on a balcony behind the speaking President, surrounded by some of his co-conspirators. And a few weeks after hearing Lincoln's words of reconciliation and peace, he did what he did.

Well, you know the end of that story, and you know the end of this one. John's head is removed from his body and brought to Salome on a platter. She brings this delicacy in to her happy and delighted mother, and John's disciples bury his disfigured body. In some ways, this is a typical martyrdom story. The prophet stands up to the powers-that-be; they react with fury; he dies. But in some ways it is also not typical, since martyrdom stories usually conclude with a prediction or description of the martyr's vindication. But where is the note of vindication, of judgment, of balancing the scales, in the story of John the Baptist? It seems to be utterly lacking. John's disciples simply gather up his mutilated body and bury it, and the story ends on this dying note.

But here, I think, is the hidden message of the John the Baptist story, and of our own story, as understood by Christian theology. There is no vindication for John himself, just as sometimes there is no vindication for us. John's only vindication comes through Jesus, whose story so closely resembles his. Jesus, like John, is "eagerly heard" and becomes the object of the curiosity of a leader, who tries unsuccessfully to save him. Jesus, like John, falls victim to his enemies' murderous intention, is arrested and bound, and is shamefully executed and buried. But Jesus, unlike John, does not stay dead. In the overall arc of Mark's narrative, Jesus' resurrection supplies the vindication that John's death lacks.

Somehow, then, the compensation for John's sufferings—and, we may add, for our own sufferings and humiliations when they go untreated and unavenged in this world—that compensation is mysteriously wrapped up in the vindication of Jesus. The narrative of John does not conclude with victory but with mutilation; there is no happy ending here, any more than our own story will end on a cheerful note. Certainly we may experience moments of joy and deliverance in this life, but ultimately we are fighting a losing battle. We will end our days in weakness, senility, suffering, and death—and that's the best-case scenario. Our stories will not end in triumph and vindication; but Jesus' story did, and the good news is that our stories, like John's, have now been baptized into that story of Jesus, and that fact utterly changes the atmosphere of every breath we take.

So I ask one last time: who was John? How can we sort through the numerous and conflicting images of this protean figure? Was he a Christian or a Jew, a revolutionary or a religious reformer? What is the ultimate truth about him? But that, again, is part of a larger question: what is the ultimate truth about any of us? We, too, embody tensions, even contradictions; we, too, perhaps, would be described by different people in different, even conflicting ways—some more pleasant than others. But maybe all that doesn't matter. Maybe the ultimate message of today's gospel for us is that all this ambiguity about who we are, and the sad incompleteness of our

lives, is finally beside the point; because we, and all humanity, have been taken up into the indestructible and triumphant narrative of Jesus Christ. Amen.