

# We are called to live prophetically

**May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Well what a lovely reading we've just heard! How uplifting! You've come to hear some encouraging words, sing some uplifting hymns, and instead you get a nasty story with a head on a platter. You might want to get your money back.

Royalty, booze, lust, arrogance, murder – it makes a great episode of EastEnders.

What can we learn from this famous passage in Mark?

The passage recounts the relationship between two very different figures. One, a man of status, who has power through wealth and military muscle. And another man, a wild-looking preacher from the wilderness, without money or warriors – but with a strange power of his own.

This preacher had been going around doing disturbing things. He'd been calling people to examine themselves with open eyes, and repent of their sins – meaning any ways of living that created barriers between themselves and God. He'd been baptizing them in the river, as a sign of turning back to God. And he'd been telling them to get ready.

“The time is near!”, he shouted. “Something is about to happen that will change everything. God is about to reveal his truth – to establish his kingdom in a new way.”

He'd become a threat to those in charge. Because this John the Baptist had started challenging Herod, the ruler of Galilee. John criticized the behaviour of Herod and his wife Herodias, who he married after she left his brother for him. But John likely saw this as the tip of the iceberg. It was a symptom of something deeper – of the way in which those in charge had become self-interested, more concerned about shoring up their own status than about using their power to care for the people.

And what was especially threatening to Herod was John's talk of a new kind of kingdom – one characterised by forgiveness and love – and led by someone to come who would be the true king, who would reveal God's truth. This was dangerous.

Now Mark presents Herod ambiguously, not as outright evil. He seemed to respect John and liked talking to him. But at the same time, he wasn't listening seriously. He didn't see it as actually demanding something of him, as requiring him to open himself up to change.

And in that fateful party, he made an arrogant promise as a display of his power. And when his bluff was called, he became more concerned about his own pride than serving justice. He had John the Baptist killed.

What we get in Herod is an image of a man who uses his power corruptly, for his own interests.

What we get in John, however, is someone who shows us what it means to live in God's way – and who shows us just how much it can cost us.

For John was a prophet – a messenger of God. He followed a long line of ancient Hebrew prophets, people like Amos, who we heard about in our first reading. These were ordinary people, in Amos' case a shepherd, who God called to deliver uncomfortable truths to those in power – to call them away from injustice and back to God.

The prophets are truth-tellers. They reveal things about God. And we can learn from them, because each one of us is called to live a *prophetic* kind of life. We're called to *live prophetically*.

That sounds daunting. But what it means is - we're called to live in such a way that we point to the deepest truth of things, that John too was pointing at.

The truth is this: that each of us is loved utterly, relentlessly, by God. That God loves us so much that he enters the world as one of us, in Jesus, and suffers and dies and rises again for us. And that because of his love, God wants us to love each other, and turn away from anything that obstructs that love.

That's what we're called to point to, in our words and actions. That's what it means to live prophetically.

And as part of this path, which is God's way, we're called to challenge things that obstructs that truth.

When we see exclusion; hatred; violence; any structures of society that make people feel that they are inferior or unworthy – these are injustices that deny the truth of who we are, beloved by God.

The church, globally, nationally, locally, is called to challenge them.

For the church to live prophetically, it must follow John, in calling out injustice when we see it - even if it costs us. Our world is only going to get more unstable. We must be ready to call out the politicians who demonise minorities; the companies that profit from environmental collapse. The bombs dropping and the shots being fired. The church universal must challenge them.

And to live prophetically, the church must be ready to speak truth to itself. It must be ready to repent of its own abuses; of the sins of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, and all other forms of exclusion that still persist in the church.

And it must model a different way of life to the world. A life where we don't prioritise self-interest, like the Herods of the world, but where we prioritise deepening our love. We model it by continually seeking reconciliation with each other, trying to love and seek the best for each other even when we disagree.

This is the courageous, costly way of life we're called to as a community – but it's also what we're called to as individual disciples too.

What might it look like in your life, to follow in the footsteps of John and live prophetically? To be a truth-teller, who points to God's love and challenges injustice?

Maybe for you, living prophetically means being willing to speak up when you someone being treated unfairly – at work, at home, among friends. It

might mean holding those with power to account, or being a voice for those who have no voice.

Maybe for you, living prophetically means joining a campaign to combat discrimination, or helping with a charity to support the marginalised.

Maybe it means making tough choices to change habits of consumption; to make sacrifices to live more sustainably, to respond to the injustice of climate change.

And maybe, it means refusing to return hate for hate. Praying for our enemies. Trying to forgive those who cause us pain. That can be the hardest thing we can try and do, and sometimes it will be too much for us. But when we try to live like that, then we're living prophetically. Then we're pointing to a different way of being.

None of this is easy. It's a hard road, to try and live prophetically. It takes sacrifice.

What we learn from the story of Herod and John the Baptist is that when we follow in God's way – when we prioritise being truth-tellers – we may get hurt. It's risky, because when we speak truth to power we ruffle feathers; we may make ourselves unpopular.

And it's risky because we have to be ready to speak truth not just to the Herods of the world, but to ourselves. We have to be ready to confront our own tendency to damage others, or the planet, or ourselves. We have to be honest with ourselves, and that can hurt too.

So following in God's way is costly. But when we try and live prophetically, walking in John's footsteps, walking the way of the Cross, which is suffering for righteousness – when we do this, we find we gain more than we can ever have imagined. We find our purpose – to grow ever deeper in love with the God who loves us, to be God's hands and feet, and to show the truth of God's love to the world.

**Amen.**