

The way of Christian discipleship, because it promises so much, is particularly apt at providing disappointments. Our ministries never go as we have planned. At the beginning, we are excited by the power of the Holy Spirit to make us instruments of miraculous healing and testimony; and indeed, we should be. But the end, somehow, always looks a little more like the humiliation of the cross.

Rich Mullins was a contemporary Christian singer of the 80s and 90s, born in Richmond, Indiana. He is perhaps best known in Evangelical churches for his songs, “Awesome God” and “Sometimes by Step,” but these were just the surface of a deeper ministry to the Native American youth on reservations, helping them to break cycles of addiction through art and music. In one of his songs, Rich wrote:

*When I leave, I wanna go out like Elijah,
With a whirlwind to fuel my chariot of fire,
And when I look back on the stars,
it'll be like a candlelight in Central Park,
and it won't break my heart to say goodbye.*

Rich had big ambitions for ministry; his legacy has been enormous, and his life has helped many Christians encounter Jesus and help make God's love incarnate in the world. But Rich didn't get to finish his ministry the way he wanted to. Rich prayed for a chariot of fire, and a glorious ascension; instead, in 1997, he died in a Jeep accident, at the early age of 41.

In our Gospel Reading this morning, Mark presents us with the strange and disappointing tale of the martyrdom of John the Baptist. If there was ever anyone whose ministry possessed great expectations, it was John's. The angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah that his son would go “with the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Upon John's shoulders rests nothing less than the fulfillment of the prophecy of the prophet Malachi.

Yet in Mark's Gospel this morning we hear nothing of John's glorious and fiery ascension, nor the passing on of a twofold prophetic mantle to Jesus, as Elijah passed his mantle to Elisha; rather, we are faced with the gruesome and tragic spectacle of the prophet's head brought in upon a platter. To Jesus, it seems, John has only passed on the mantle of an even more shameful death.

John came to reconcile parent and child, but was killed in the crossfire of a family feud between Herod Antipas and his daughter, Salome. John came to call the disobedient to repentance, but dies while Herod persists in his sin. John's failure in the court of Herod cannot have been more dramatically portrayed. At first blush, then, John's ministry seems to have ended roundly in failure

And yet, when we pay attention to the setting of this tale within the context of Mark's Gospel, we see that John's death stands at the center of what it means to be a Christian

disciple. It is set as a kind of narrative interruption between Jesus' sending out of the Twelve to heal in power, and of their successful return Mark 6:30. The tale of the Baptist's death thus forms the dark, silent center of the otherwise hopeful narrative of Jesus' burgeoning Galilean ministry.

But why has Mark placed this story here? In Matthew's retelling of Mark, the Baptist's death happens much later on in Jesus' ministry. Why has Mark placed it here in the first sending of the twelve?

The answer seems to be that despite all appearances to the contrary, John's ministry is, in God's economy, the model of a successful witness. John was faithful to his calling to preach repentance even unto death. This should serve as a warning to us, who would measure our success in terms of numbers and popularity. The true disciple, in Mark's vision, is the one who follows the stone that the builders have rejected.

A second point is worth noting here: John's death, however disappointing to his own disciples, plays exactly the role that God had ordained for it, in making a way for Jesus to reclaim the kingdom of Israel. The particular aspects that appear shameful to us are perfectly and providentially designed to bring glory to Christ, in a way that neither John nor Herod could fathom. To properly understand this last point, we need to take a closer look at Mark. We will begin by considering the martyrdom story as a tale of ruined expectations. We will then turn to Jesus's response to John's martyrdom, and consider how God, in his providence, can turn the most seeming failure into a royal highway.

When viewed on its own, as I have mentioned, John's martyrdom is a tale of failure. Mark employs all his literary creativity to make this point. John confronts the wicked king and queen, Herod and Herodias, in a manner that recalls Elijah before Ahab and Jezebel. Yet unlike his prophetic predecessor, John does not escape the conniving and murderous queen. Likewise, John's story recalls the court romance of the book of Esther, with a similarly disappointing twist. In the latter story, King Ahasuerus is pleased with Esther, and offers her up to half his kingdom. Esther uses this influence to save her cousin Mordecai, and indeed, the entire Jewish people, from the gallows of Haman. In Mark's Gospel, Herod promises Salome "up to half of his kingdom", which she uses to insure the Israelite prophet's death. To the reader of Mark familiar with the Esther and Elijah stories, Mark portrays John's death as a double misfortune.

The irony of John's double failure was not lost on Mark's Jesus. He undoubtedly saw them for what they were: the mockery of the reign of God by Herod's court. Herod had decked himself in all the trappings of success, including calling himself a "king". In reality, he was only a tetrarch, a puppet of the Roman government. Jesus' response, however, is quite counter-cultural. Jesus does not stage a political coup and attempt to retake the Jerusalem throne. He does not, as Jehu, head off to Jezreel, and have Herodias thrown down from her tower, like Jezebel, to a pack of dogs. Instead, he does what only a true king can do. Jesus, in response to Herod, holds a banquet.

Here, Mark's message of hope shines through the gloom of John's death. Jesus' grief at the death of the Baptist must have been very real; immediately after John's death, Jesus withdraws with his disciples to a solitary place to rest. But followed by crowds of Israelites, Mark tells us that in true kingly fashion:

“Jesus had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding villages and buy something to eat...but Jesus, taking the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples to set before the people.”

Jesus, the true king, holds a banquet. Not like Herod's self-serving party, but a miraculous banquet, reminiscent of Elisha, who also multiplied loaves to feed 100 people. By acting in the person of Elisha, Jesus takes up the mantle of John, signaling true continuity between John's ministry and his. And yet, Mark has woven an even deeper note of the redemption of John's martyrdom into story of Jesus' feeding of the 5000.

Mark tells us that at the feeding of the 5000, Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave. These words recall Jesus' fourfold action at the institution of the last supper, which we celebrate together each Sunday. To Mark's church, the use of the words: take, bless, break, and give, color the feeding of the 5000 with Eucharistic overtones. The contrast with Herod's banquet could not be more poignant. Herod in the royal palace killed a prophet, and served his head on a dining platter, to feed no one; in the feeding of the 5000, by contrast, we have the picture of Jesus, on a quiet evening, on a deserted hillside, serving his own body and blood in baskets for the life of the starving world. In this inversion, Mark shows Jesus taking up a death as devastating as John's and transforming it by his own self-sacrifice. Jesus' banquet calls the bluff of Herod's petty grab for power; and, in confirmation of Herod's worst fears, Jesus' banquet foreshadows the one thought that has haunted Herod many a night, a power that he cannot contend with: the power of God's resurrection of the dead.

Mark thus challenges us to think about our own lives and ministries differently. Like the twelve, our ministries may at times be full only of successes and miraculous healings; as John's story foretells, however, they will likely also be one riddled with misunderstanding, failure, and even death. The question is not whether we will encounter failure and setbacks; the question is whether we will cling to Christ in these moments of trial, and trust him to the bitter end. Although the disciples did not realize it at the time of their first mission, the death of Jesus would soon alert them to the cost of their discipleship. St. Peter would be crucified upside down, St. Paul would be beheaded, and in the second century, St. Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, would be marched across Asia Minor and Macedonia in chains to be fed to the lions of Rome. The martyrs before us invite us to courage in our Christian journeys. They call us from beyond the veil to faith in the true King of whose banquet we have a foretaste here today; they call us to hope that our failures and sorrows can and are being redeemed by the power of Jesus'

Pentecost 10, Year B, RCL

resurrection, for his glory, in ways that we cannot imagine; and they call us to that perfect love which is without fear, because God first loved us.

Mark also sets before us the possibility of two worlds: the world as ruled by Herod, and the world as ruled by Jesus. It is because we confess that the world is ruled by Jesus that we gather here today, to encourage one another in our ministries, to take up our crosses anew, and to make our prayer with the ancient church to God our Father in heaven:

*“As grain once scattered on the hillsides
was in this broken bread made one,
So from all the lands thy church be gathered
Into thy kingdom by thy Son.”*

Amen.