

Immediately Part II:

Human All Too Human

1. Our attention this morning will focus on **four moments key moments in our Gospel story:**
2. **Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great's, rash oath** "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom".
3. Salome's **question** to her mother: "What should I ask for?"
4. Her mother's **response:** "The head of John the Baptist"
5. Salome's **response:** "***Immediately*** she rushed back to the king..."
6. Herod Antipas' **response, the most complex:** "...deeply grieved...out of regard for the guests...he did not want to refuse her. ***Immediately*** the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head...he gave it to the girl...Then the girl gave it to her mother..."
7. Now you know why **the title: Immediately Part II.** And now you know the meaning of **the subtitle:** 'Human All Too Human'. **This is not just Salome's problem, or her mother's, or Antipas's: it's our problem: it's a human problem. I shall define that problem at the end of our reflection.**
8. I'm going to start with Salome's **question:** "What should I ask for?"
9. It speaks to me of something central to the Gospel passage: **the question of choice:** how will I *decide* to do this or that, to *think* this or that, to *value* this or that? And, most of all, what is *really* most important to me, what matters most to me, what do I *value* most in life... **that will finally determine the decision I take. No decision I make, particularly in the heat of the moment, occurs in a vacuum.** It's the end of many years of enculturation: my family upbringing, the friends I keep, the experiences I've had or the ways I've decided things in the past. All of us here this morning, can relate to that. As I mention my own experiences, I invite you think of the ones that you've had that lead up to this moment in time, **knowing, that as we do this exercise together, that God is always with us. Knowing that we are never alone. That God stands with us, carries us when we can't carry ourselves, takes our old story—and gives us a new one, a story forged and hammered, and fashioned, like the forgotten art of the blacksmith's, to use an analogy, in the white hot coals of love, of divine love: a love that will never let us go.**

10. For me there are three memories, and many more but these will do for today. Some I've mentioned before...but I'm going to give them a different slant, and some of you might remember them.
11. At the age of 6 going on 7: Bill Hayley and the Comments: Rock around the clock... having to forgive my father... the deep sense that a child has, but can't articulate at the time that this was wrong...
12. At the age of 11: (1957) a 5th class school acquaintance, who was developing into a friend...and the matchbox toys. Such an important turning point for me: I just *knew* where his invitation would lead, and I remember it so well: that I would *never* go down that way.
13. And finally, at the age of 12: Christmas 1958: my step-uncles fighting over the inheritance...and out of it the *determination* to find out for myself what was *really important in life, really valuable*.
14. What are those decisive moments for you? And what have they meant for you?
15. For me, it was the importance of questioning things, testing them. What was it for you? That's a rhetorical question, I don't require you to answer it today. Maybe it's something we could discuss at our next Q & A session of a Sunday afternoon.
16. Yes, the importance of questioning things, testing them. **But there is right and wrong way of questioning.** For Salome, it was a **passive, subservient way of questioning:** allowing her mother to dictate what she should do: accepting the answer without even a moment of reflection, never challenging the taking of the life of a man, and not just an ordinary man. Even Antipas knew that: this was a holy man...he feared him, he liked to listen to him even when he was challenged by him, when he was confused and perplexed by him. But when the moment came, there was nothing of **strength** there, nothing of **principle** in his inner life upon which he could draw to help him.
17. Yes, there was **grief, a deep grief** we're told...but that wasn't enough...For you see all that was there was an insane addiction to **reputation, an insane addiction** to save face at all cost, even if it meant the death of a good man, a godly man, an innocent...even that. What he really valued came to the surface that memorable day.

18. **What do you value? What do I value? What matters to you, what matters to me? *Really* matters. That is the question that our reading causes us to reflect upon this morning. And with its answer, will come the discovery of what lies even behind even that realisation.**

19. For you see that searching question and its answer is not enough. **We have to go deeper than that, not with a question, so much as an understanding, an understanding of myself and others based upon a deep appreciation about how human I am, you are, how all too human we all are.**
20. And it comes down to this realisation: that my most heart-felt, my most positive and constructive **desires** and **aspirations**, and beliefs can so easily, in moments of insecurity, in moments of fear untouched by love and compassion, so quickly turn in upon themselves in self-destructive and destructive behaviours.
21. Without that realisation, that understanding, I'll be too quick to judge others, too quick to judge Antipas, Salome and her mother. For theirs, in our eyes, is all too obvious a lapse of judgement. There are much more complex ones: cf., the anti-racists, anti-fascists kicking the racists in the head in a Melbourne park? We are never more dangerous, never more lacking in empathy, than when we are outraged and we believe we are right, and *they* are wrong.
22. Shakespeare understood it in *Othello*. The Iagos of the world: **so full of resentment, and jealousies**... This white male, Iago, who envies the black man, Othello: that in a white dominated and dominating society, this black man, this Othello should be *his* master, his commanding officer; should marry that white woman, Desdemona when she could have, *should* have been his, Iago's. So resentful thinking is: if Iago, says to himself, if I can't have her, if I can't live his charmed existence, than neither can Othello.
23. And so Iago the resentful white male, plots Othello the black man's demise, his downfall. He looks at Othello with eyes of a distorted, damaged desire. I'm going to take him down, he says to himself. And as he thinks about it, what he's going to do to bring Othello down, he likens **Othello's happiness**, which he hates because **Iago's misery can't stand it, he**

likens that happiness to a finely tuned and beautiful instrument: “I’m going to take your beautiful happy happy life, and put it out of tune, so that people will stop their ears when they hear it, after I’ve finished with you....and the crime of passion, I’m going to cause you to commit.

24. **And how does Iago do it?** By playing on Othello’s naivety and insecurity: the black man in a white man’s world, the military man, that Othello is, who knows so little about love, is so insecure in love. And because Othello is a righteous man, Iago chooses a righteous cause: the infidelity, the unfaithfulness of a wife. Little matter that the accusations are false: Othello is too insecure, too fearful to even question Iago’s accusation: he *immediately* accepts the accusation of Desdemona Othello’s wife’s unfaithfulness. So easily accepts the evidence that has been planted on her. A dropped handkerchief. Othello’s, in his own eyes, is a righteous anger, his a just cause.
25. But no murder, no taking of human life, no crime against humanity can justify even a just cause, lightly. And we don’t have to kill people to commit a crime against humanity. Take the case of Imran Mohammed now living in Chicago. Our government, in the name of border integrity, and its outrage at the alleged illegality of his attempt to come to Australia as a refugee did things to this man that are in any other context, unconscionable. All these years we have rarely heard his story, heard his name, saw his face. If we had, we would never have allowed this to be perpetrated by our government in our name, the people who elected it. The fatal flaw of our democracy: that such outrageous government actions should lead to this: the passing of what should have been our decision, to another country—in this case the United States of America who accepted him when we rejected him..., all in the name of saving face, in the name of protecting our borders.
26. Listen to Imran Mohamed’s words I hope they will affect you as deeply as they affected when I read them again this morning to myself.

27. “I thought”, he writes, “I had lost all hope when the Australian government forcibly moved me to Manus Island on October 29, 2013. For so long my life was controlled, my life was not mine...I saw what I didn’t want to see, I ate what I didn’t want to eat. I wore clothes that I didn’t want to wear. I heard what I didn’t want to hear. I slept when I didn’t want to sleep. I was treated in a way I didn’t want to be treated and I lived where I didn’t want to live. The pressure I was under was enormous—enough to break me into a thousand pieces and to strip me of the things that helped me to feel like a human being. There was not a single moment for me to feel what I wanted to feel. It was like I was living for the rest of the world, but not for myself...our loss of hope, and lack of clarity about our process and our future deeply damaged our emotional health...the setting was so inhumane, it broke me. I emerged only through the beauty and gift of writing., which gave me motivation and purpose to wake up every morning...[and then] at 7:30 am on Tuesday May 29 2018 I said goodbye to PNG. And so ended five years of torture. The last words I heard from the custom officer as I was boarding were: “Don’t ever come back to my country.” And then Imran adds...”The world would have known nothing of us without the tireless work of lawyers, journalists in Australia. I would have been lost in a sea of evil without the generosity, kindness, pure love and care we received from our Australian supporters.” [The Saturday Paper, July 14-20, 2018, pp.1/4].

28. I feel ashamed and proud at the same time. Ashamed that our government failed this man. Proud that as Australians we didn’t fail him. But then injustice at such a high level is so difficult to deal with. But we can and we did deal with it and we continue to deal with these things...often so totally unnoticed. And *that* encourages me.

<p>29. cf., Pender’s list...the power of research...the power of intelligent and compassionate action, the power of one.</p>

30. **We see it so easily in the Gospel story...it seems so self-evident in Shakespeare's *Othello*, but not so easily in the lives of others, in those around us, sometimes even in those so close to us.**

31. Once we realise this, it's not that impossible to understand, how an Australian government that is so compassionate towards the Thai boys who have been rescued from the prison of their cave, rescued from death and how our government so supportive of the massive effort of thousands to rescue these boys and give them a future, that this same government is at one and the same time, blind to the Imran Mohameds of the world. Does this government, our government realise that the boy who answered the British questions: how many of you are there, was until that moment, a refugee in Thailand a stateless boy who was able to interpret in those critical days of rescue. I don't think he will be stateless for long. Do you? And why: because they have seen his face, heard his name.

32. At the end of NAIDOC week, the greatest blindness of all. Our resident indigenous community aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples...that's why it's taking so long to respond to the Uluru statement.

33. Learn to listen, listen to learn.

34. PRAYER FOR THE SELF

Give me a candle of the Spirit, O God, as I go down into the deeps of my being. Show me the hidden things, the creatures of my dreams, the storehouse of forgotten memories and hurts. Take me down to the spring of my life, and tell me my nature and my name. Give me freedom to grow, so that I may become that self, the seed of which You planted in me at my making.

Out of the depths I cry to You...

George Appleton

Post script: William Loader

Mark tells us the issue of the arrest was John's criticism about the second marriage. The issue was neither the divorce nor the second marriage in itself; it was that it was a marriage to the wife of his half brother and so broke the biblical laws set out in Leviticus 18:16. Sadducees and some writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls would have objected on the grounds that she was his niece, but that, too, is not the issue according to Mark's story which appears to share the broader Pharisaic interpretation of Leviticus 18 which did not extend the prohibition of marrying nephews to prohibition of marrying nieces. Josephus suggests that Herod's concern was that John represented a source of unrest and subversion. This is probably correct, whether that included criticism of the new marriage or not. Josephus tells us that John was taken to the fortress of Machaerus in Perea, across the Jordan from Judea and also part of Antipas' territory along with Galilee, and probably closer to where John exercised his ministry. The party appears typical for the time. The women are in an adjoining room. This is a men's party. That is why Salome must go there to consult her mother. Dancing girls were often prostitutes. The promise to give away half his kingdom is the stuff of legendary stories of this kind (see Esther 5:3, 6; 7:2). It also serves to expose fickleness. It is a terrible story, not just for its gory ending, but also for the machinations of power and the structures of injustice it displays. It is a sad irony that preachers have sometimes focussed on women's wiles as its 'message'. It should rather be seen as a story of exploitation - of women, of citizens and slaves; and as a story about silencing the cry for justice. Notice that Herod feared and is fascinated by John. John is not the last prophet whom leaders have reduced to an item of intellectual fascination, nor the last preacher. Ideas are fun. This bizarre story, lifted from the 'popular press of the day' or its Galilean equivalent, casts a shadow over what is to come. Fickle, exploitative political powers will perform another convenient execution, reflecting arbitrary individual choice and reflecting structures of injustice. Mark's readers may have made the connection between themselves and Herod's wondering: can it be that someone so callously executed comes to life again? Is the risen Jesus to be seen where such powers are confronted anew, whether within us as individuals or among us in our society? Or does the entertainment drown out the voices?

