**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MARK-030**. **THE MARTYRDOM OF JOHN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"17.* *For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her. 18. For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. 19. Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not: 20. For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. 21. And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee; 22. And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. 23. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. 24. And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. 25. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist. 26. And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. 27. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison, 28. And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother."*

*Mark 6:17-28*

This Herod was a son of the grim old tiger who slew the infants of Bethlehem. He was a true cub of a bad litter, with his father's ferocity, but without his force. He was sensual, cruel, cunning, and infirm of purpose. Rome allowed him to play at being a king, but kept him well in hand. No doubt his anomalous position as a subject prince helped to make him the bad man he was. Herodias, the Jezebel to this Ahab, was his brother's wife, and niece to both her husband and Herod. Elijah was not far off; John's daring outspokenness, of course, made the indignant woman his implacable enemy.

**I. This story gives an example of the waking of conscience.**

When Christ's name reached even the court, where such tidings would have no ready entrance, what was only an occasion of more or less languid gossip and curiosity to others stirred the sleeping accuser in Herod's breast. He had no doubt as to who this new Teacher, armed with mightier powers than John who did no miracleshad ever possessed, was. His conviction that he was John, come back with increased power, was immediate, and was held fast, in spite of the buzz of other opinions.

Note the unusual order of the sentence in verse 16: John whom I beheaded, he is, etc. The terrified king blurts out the name of his dread first, then tremblingly takes the guilt of the deed to himself, and last speaks the terrifying thought that he is risen. A man who has a sin in his memory can never be sure that its ghost will not suddenly start up. Trivial incidents will rouse the sleeping conscience. Some nothing, a chance word, a scent, a sound, the look on a face, the glow of an evening sky, may bring all the foul past up again. A puff of wind clears away the mist of oblivion, and the old sin starts into vividness as if done yesterday. You touch a secret spring, and there yawns in the floor a gap leading down to a dungeon.

Conscience thus wakened is free from all illusions as to guilt. I beheaded. There are no excuses now about Herodiasurgency, or Salome's beauty, or the rash oath, or the need of keeping it, before his guests. The deed stands clear of all these, as his own act. It is ever so. When conscience speaks, sophistications about temptations or companions, or necessity, or the more learned excuses which philosophers make about environment and heredity as weakening responsibility and diminishing guilt, shrivel to nothing. The present operations of conscience distinctly predict future still more complete remembrance of, and sense of responsibility for, long past sins. There will be a resurrection of men's evil deeds, as well as of their bodies, and each of them will shake its gory locks at its author, and say, Thou didst it.

There is no proof that Herod was a Sadducee, disbelieving in a resurrection; but, whether he was or not, the terrors of conscience made short work of the difficulties in the way of his supposition. He was right in believing that evil deeds are gifted with an awful immortality, and will certainly rise again to shake their doer's soul with terrors.

**II. The narrative harks back to tell the story of John's martyrdom.**

It sets vividly forth the inner discord and misery of half-and-half convictions. Herodias was strong enough to get John put in prison, and apparently she tried with all the tenacity of a malignant woman to have him assassinated, by contrived accident or open sentence; but that she could not manage.

Mark's analysis of the play of contending feeling in the weak king is barely intelligible in the Authorised Version, but is clearly shown in the Revised Version. He feared John,--the jailer afraid of his prisoner,--knowing that he was a righteous man and an holy. Goodness is awful. The worst men know it when they see it, and pay it the homage of dread, if not of love. And kept him safe(not ob- but pre-served him); that is, from Herodiasrevenge. And when he heard him, he was much perplexed. The reading thus translated differs from that in the Authorised Version by two letters only, and obviously is preferable. Herod was a weak-willed man, drawn by two stronger natures pulling in opposite directions.

So he alternated between lust and purity, between the foul kisses of the temptress at his side and the warnings of the prophet in his dungeon. But in all his vacillation he could not help listening to John, but heard him gladly, and mind and conscience approved the nobler voice. Thus he staggered along, with religion enough to spoil some of his sinful delights, but not enough to make him give them up.

Such a state of partial conviction is not unusual. Many of us know quite well that, if we would drop some habit, which may not be very grave, we should be less encumbered in some effort which it is our interest or duty to make; but the conviction has not gone deeper than the understanding. Like a shot which has only got half way through the armoured skin of a man-of-war, it has done no execution, nor reached the engine-room where the power that drives the life is. In more important matters such imperfect convictions are widespread. The majority of slaves to vice know perfectly well that they should give it up. And in regard to the salvation which is in Christ, there are multitudes who know in their inmost consciousness that they ought to be Christians.

Such a condition is one liable to unrest and frequent inner conflict. Truly, he is much perplexedwhose conscience pulls him one way, and his inclinations another. There is no more miserable condition than that of the man whose will is cleft in twain, and who has a continual battle raging within. Conscience may be bound and thrust down into a dungeon, like John, and lust and pride may be carousing overhead, but their mirth is hollow, and every now and then the stern voice comes up through the gratings, and the noisy revelry is hushed, while it speaks doom.

Such a state of inner strife comes often from unwillingness to give up one special evil. If Herod could have plucked up resolve to pack Herodias about her business, other things might have come right. Many of us are ruined by being unwilling to let some dear delight go. If thine eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out.

We do not make up for such cowardly shrinking from doing right by pleasure in the divine word which we are not obeying. Herod no doubt thought that his delight in listening to John went some way to atone for his refusal to get rid of Herodias. Some of us think ourselves good Christians because we assent to truth, and even like to hear it, provided the speaker suit our tastes. Glad hearing only aggravates the guilt of not doing. It is useless to admire John if you keep Herodias.

**III. The end of the story gives an example of the final powerlessness of such half-convictions.**

One need not repeat the grim narrative of the murder. We all know it. One knows not which is the more repugnant--the degradation of the poor child Salome to the level of a dancing-girl, the fell malignity of the mother who would shame her daughter for such an end, the maudlin generosity of Herod, flushed with wine and excited passion, the hideous request from lips so young, the ineffectual sorrow of Herod, his fantastic sense of obligation, which scrupled to break a wicked promise and did not scruple to murder a prophet, or the ghastly picture of the girl hurrying to her mother with the freshly severed head, dripping on to the platter and staining her fair young hands.

This was what all the convictions of John's righteousness had come to. So had ended the half yielding to his brave rebukes and the ineffectual aspirations after cleaner living. That chaos of lust and blood teaches that partial reformation is apt to end in a deeper plunge into fouler mire. If a man is false to his feeblest conviction, he makes himself a worse man all through. A partial thaw is generally followed by keener frost than before. A soul half melted and cooled again is harder to melt than before. An abortive slave-rising rivets the chains.

The incident teaches that simple weakness may come to be the parent of great sin. In a world like this, where there are always more voices soliciting to wrong than to right, to be weak is in the long run to be wicked. Fatal facility of disposition ruins hundreds of unthinking men. Nothing is more needful than that young people should learn to say No, and should cultivate a wholesome obstinacy which is afraid of nothing but of sinning against God.

If we look onwards to this Herod's last appearance in Scripture, we get further lessons. He desired to see Jesus that he might see a miracle done to amuse him, like a conjuring trick. Convictions and terrors had faded from his frivolous soul. He has forgotten that he once thought Jesus to be John come again. He sees Christ, and sees nothing in Him; and Christ says nothing to Herod, because He knew it would be useless.

It is an awful thing to put one's self beyond the hearing of that voice, which all that are in the graves shall hear. The most effectual stopping for our ears is neglect of what we know to be His will. If we will not listen to Him, we shall gradually lose the power of hearing Him, and then He will lock His lips, and answer nothing. We dare not say that Jesus is dumb to any man while life lasts, but we dare not refrain from saying that that condition of utter insensibility to His voice may be indefinitely approached by us, and that neglected convictions bring us terribly far on the way towards it.