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

**MATTHEW-086**. **THE MARTYRDOM OF JOHN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *At that time Herod the tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus, 2. And said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him. 3. For Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and put him in prison for Herodias sake, his brother Philip's wife. 4. For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her. 5. And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet. 6. But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod. 7. Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask. 8. And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger. 9. And the king was sorry: nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her. 10. And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison. 11. And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel: and she brought it to her mother. 12. And his disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus."*

*Matthew 14:1-12*

The singular indifference of the Bible to the fate of even its greatest men is exemplified in the fact that the martyrdom of John is only told incidentally, in explanation of Herod's alarm. But for that he would apparently have dropped out of the narrative, as a man sinks in the sea, without a bubble or a ripple. Christ is the sole theme of the Gospels, and all others are visible only as His light falls on them.

It took a long time for news of Christ to reach the ears of Herod. Peasants hear of Him before princes, whose thick palace walls and crowds of courtiers shut out truth. The first thing to note is the alarm of the conscience-stricken king. We learn from the other evangelists that there was a difference of opinion among the attendants of Herod--not very good judges of a religious teacher--as to who this new miracle-working Rabbi might be, but the tetrarch has no hesitation. There is no proof that Herod was a Sadducee; but he probably thought as little about a resurrection as if he had been, and, in any case, did not expect dead men to be starting up again, one by one, and mingling with the living. His conscience made a coward of him, and his fear made that terrible which would else have been thought impossible. In his terror he makes confidants of his slaves, overleaping the barriers of position, in his need of some ears to pour his fears into. He was right in believing that he had not finished with John, and in expecting to meet him again with mightier power to accuse and condemn. If twere done when tis done, says Macbeth; but it is not done. There is a resurrection of deeds as well as of bodies, and all our buried badnesses will front us again, shaking their gory locks at us, and saying that we did them.

Instead of following closely the narrative, we may best gather up its lessons by considering the actors in the tragedy.

**I. We see in Herod the depths of evil possible to a weak character.**

The singular double which he, Herodias and John present to Ahab, Jezebel and Elijah, has been often noticed. In both cases a weak king is drawn in opposite directions by the stronger-willed temptress at his side, and by the stern ascetic from the desert. How John had found his way into kingshouseswe do not know; but, as he carried thither his undaunted boldness of plain-spoken preaching of morality and repentance, it was inevitable that he should soon find his way from the palace to the dungeon. There must have been some intercourse between Herod and him before his imprisonment, or he could not have shaken the king's conscience with his blunt denunciations. From the account in Mark, it would appear that, after his imprisonment, he gained great influence over the tetrarch, and led him some steps on the way of goodness. But Herod was infirm of purpose, and a beautiful fiend was at his side, and she had an iron will sharpened to an edge by hatred, and knew her own mind, which was murder. Between them, the weaker nature was much perplexed, and like a badly steered boat, yawed in its course, now yielding to the impulse from John, now to that from Herodias. Matthew attributes his hesitation as to killing John to his fear of the popular voice, which, no doubt, also operated. Thus he let I dare not wait upon I would, and had not strength of mind enough to hold to the one and despise the other of his discordant counsellors. He was evidently a sensual, luxurious, feeble-willed, easily frightened, superstitious and cunning despot; and, as is always the case with such, he was driven farther in evil than he meant or wished. He was entrapped into an oath, and then, instead of saying, Promises which should not have been made should not be kept, he weakly consents, from fantastic fear of what his guests will say of him, and unwillingly, out of pure imbecility, stains his soul for ever with blood. In this wicked world, weak men will always be wicked men; for it is less trouble to consent than to resist, and there are more sirens to whisper Comethan prophets to thunder, It is not lawful. Strength of will is needful for all noble life.

We may learn from Herod, also, how far we may go on the road of obedience to God's will, and yet leave it at last. What became of all his eager listening, of his partial obedience, of his care to keep John safe from Herodias's malice? All vanished like early dew. What became of his conscience-stricken alarms on hearing of Christ? Did they lead to any deep convictions? They faded away, and left him harder than before. Convictions not followed out ossify the heart. If he had sent for Christ, and told Him his fears, all might have been well. But he let them pass, and, so far as we know, they never returned. He did meet Jesus at last, when Pilate sent him the Prisoner, as a piece of politeness, and in what mood?--childish pleasure at the chance of seeing a miracle. How did Jesus answer his torrent of frivolous questions? He answered him nothing. That sad silence speaks Christ's knowledge that now even His words would be vain to create one ripple of interest on the Dead Sea of Herod's soul. By frivolity, lust, and neglect he had killed the germ of a better life, and silence was the kindest answer which perfect love could give him.

He shows us, too, the intimate connection of all sins. The common root of every sin is selfishness, and the shapes which it takes are protean and interchangeable. Lust dwells hard by hate. Sensual crimes and cruelty are closely akin. The one vice which Herod would not surrender, dragged after it a whole tangle of other sins. No sin dwells alone. There is none barren among them. They are gregarious, and a solitary sin is more seldom seen than a single swallow. Herod is an illustration, too, of a conscience fantastically sensitive while it is dead to real crimes. He has no twinges for his sin with Herodias, and no effective ones at killing John, but he thinks it would be wrong to break his oath. The two things often go together; and many a brigand in Calabria, who would cut a throat without hesitation, would not miss mass, or rob without a little image of the Virgin in his hat. We often make compensation for easy indulgence in great sins by fussy scrupulosity about little faults, and, like Herod, had rather commit murder than not be polite to visitors.

**II. The next actors in the tragedy are Herodias and her daughter.**

What a miserable destiny to be gibbeted for ever by half a dozen sentences! One deed, after which she no doubt wiped her mouth, and said, I have done no harm, has won for the mother an immortality of ignominy. Her portrait is drawn in few strokes, but they are enough. In strength of will and unscrupulous carelessness of human life, she is the sister of Jezebel, and curiously like Shakespeare's awful creation, Lady Macbeth; but she adds a stain of sensuous passion to their vices, which heightens the horror. Her first marriage was with her full uncle; and her second, if marriage it can be called when her husband and Herod's wife were both living, was with her step-uncle, and thus triply unlawful. John's remonstrance awoke no sense of shame in her, but only malignant and murderous hate. Once resolved, no failures made her swerve from her purpose. Hers was no passing fury, but cold-blooded, deliberate determination. Her iron will and unalterable persistence were accompanied by flexibility of resource. When one weapon failed, she drew another from a full quiver. And the means which were finally successful show not only her thorough knowledge of the weak man she had to deal with, but her readiness to stoop to any degradation for herself and her child to carry her point. A thousand claims toabhorrence meet in her, as mother, wife, and queen. Many a shameless woman would have shrunk from sullying a daughter's childhood, by sending her to play the part of a shameless dancing-girl before a crew of half-tipsy revellers, and from teaching her young lips to ask for murder. But Herodias sticks at nothing, and is as insensible to the duty of a mother as to that of a wife. If we put together these features in her character, her hot animal passions, her cool inflexible revenge, her cynical disregard of all decency, her deadness to natural affection for her child, her ferocity and her cunning, we have a hideous picture of corrupted womanhood. We cannot but wonder whether, in after days, remorse ever did its merciful work upon Herodias. She urged Herod to his ruin at last by her ambition, which sought for him the title of king, and, with one redeeming touch of faithfulness, went with him into dreary exile in Gaul. Perhaps there, among strangers, and surrounded by the wreck of her projects, and when the hot fire of passion had died down, she may have remembered and repented her crime.

The criminality of the daughter largely depends upon her age, of which we have no knowledge. Perhaps she was too mere a child to understand the degradation of the dance, or the infamy of the request which her, we hope, innocent and panting lips were tutored to prefer. But, more probably, she was old enough to be her mother's fellow-conspirator, rather than her tool, and had learned only too well her lessons of impurity and cruelty. What chance had a young life in such a sty of filth? When the mother becomes the devil's deputy, what can the daughter grow up to be, but a worse edition of her? This poor girl, so sinning, and so sinned against, followed in Herodias's footsteps, and afterwards married, according to the custom of the Herods, her uncle, Philip the tetrarch. She inherited and was taught evil; that was her misfortune. She made it her own; that was her crime. As she stands there, shameless and flushed, in that hideous banqueting-hall, with her grim gift dripping red blood on the golden platter, and wicked triumph gleaming in her dark eyes, she suggests grave questions as to parentsresponsibility for children's sins, and is a living symbol of the degradation of art to the service of vice, and of the power of an evil soul to make hideous all the grace of budding womanhood.

**III. There is something dramatically appropriate in the silent death in the dungeon of the lonely forerunner.**

The faint noise of revelry may have reached his ears, as he brooded there, and wondered if the coming King would never come for his enlargement. Suddenly a gleam of light from the opened door enters his cell, and falls on the blade of the headsman's sword. Little time can be wasted, for Herodias waits. With short preface the blow falls. The King has come, and set His forerunner free, sending him to prepare His way before Him in the dim regions beyond. A world where Herod sits in the festal chamber, and John lies headless in the dungeon, needs some one to set it right. When the need is sorest, the help is nearest. Truth succeeds by the apparent failure of its apostle. Herodias may stab the dead tongue, as the legend tells that she did, but it speaks louder after death than ever. Herod kept his birthday with drunken and bloody mirth; but it was a better birthday for his victim.

IV. It needed some courage for John's disciples to come to that gloomy, blood-stained fortress, and bear away the headless trunk which scornful cruelty had flung out to rot unburied. When reverent love and sorrow had finished their task, what was the little flock without a shepherd to do? The possibility of their continued existence as a company of disciples was at an end. They show by their action that their master had profited from his last message to Jesus. At once they turn to Him, and, no doubt, the bulk of them were absorbed in the body of His followers. Sorrowful and bereaved souls betake themselves naturally to His sweet sympathy for soothing, and to His gentle wisdom for direction. The wisest thing that any of us can do is to go and tell Jesusour loneliness, and let it bind us more closely to Him.