

Mark 6:6-29

A Tale of Two Kingdoms: Part 1 - Herod

Tonight we continue our series in Mark's gospel
And over the last two Sundays
We've seen the confronting authority of Jesus over demons
And his comforting authority over people facing sickness and death
And over the next two Sundays we're going to look at a tale of two kingdoms

As usual, an outline of the talk or the full transcript are available on the foyer table
Or can be downloaded on the livestream page of the Bundy Website
Please keep your bibles open as we look at the bible references together

Let me pray

It seems that the most popular movies in recent times
are about the battle between two kingdoms
Two opposing ways of doing things
Competing and conflicting about which way is the right way to live
For example in the Lord of the Rings trilogy
Think of the battle between Sauron's evil kingdom and the fellowship of the ring
Or the Star Wars saga between the Rebellion of the Skywalkers and the Dark Side's Empire
Or the Avengers Saga
Where there's the Avengers way of looking at life in the universe versus that of Thanos
Then there's the ongoing battle between Harry Potter and Valdemort
Or most recently
The nature loving Na'vi versus the nature destroying humans in Avatar
It seems there is something about these storylines that we love
Something that draws us in
We want to know which kingdom will prevail
We're drawn in to choosing a side
And we want to be on the side that triumphs
And we wonder when the crunch comes
Whether we will choose to do what is heroic and selfless or what is selfish and cowardly
Tonight's bible passage is about two kingdoms
And a conflict between two different worldviews
Two different ways of looking at life and what it means to having meaning and purpose
And by the end of tonight
You will be given a choice between these two kingdoms

Here are the two points for tonight's talk

Kingdom come

Kingdom conflict

Let's look at our first point kingdom come

You can see right at the outset of Jesus' public ministry
That he is bringing in the kingdom of God
This is Mark chapter 1 verse 14

¹⁴ After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God:¹⁵ “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Every time Jesus preached the gospel
He was calling people to turn away from one kingdom and to join his kingdom
That’s what the word repent means
To change your mind about who you think is King
And to follow the true King

And there is no doubt in Jesus’ mind
That he himself is the true King
At the end of Matthew’s gospel this is what he says to his disciples before he leaves them
Matthew 28

¹⁸ Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

All authority everywhere has been given to me
That’s a big statement isn’t it – that’s King language
And that’s how we should think about the passage in front of us
It’s about the King extending his kingdom
Verse 7

⁷ He summoned the Twelve and began to send them out in pairs and gave them authority over unclean spirits.

Notice that phrase “gave authority”
Jesus the King is now giving his apostles authority
And he is sending them out to be his ambassadors
That title apostle quite literally means “one who is sent”
Sent with the authority to represent the sender
The disciples who witnessed the ministry of Jesus
Are going to imitate the ministry of Jesus and it’s going to come with his power
We see that clearly in verse 12

¹² So they went out and preached that people should repent.¹³ They drove out many demons, anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

In the last two Sundays
We have seen Jesus himself doing these very same things
And so like their King
The apostles are doing the work of ushering in the kingdom of God
We’re not told exactly where and for how long they went out
But if they started from Nazareth where we left off last week
It’s likely to have included the area around Lake Galilee in northern Israel
Next week, we will see the end result of the ministry of the Twelve

In verse 8 we see that this kingdom work
Is to be done by the twelve without their own resources

They are to bring very little with them
In the different gospels the list of things to take is slightly different

But in the end it's not much they are to bring
Instead they are going to rely on God to provide for them
Through the generosity of others
Immediately, you get the sense that this is a *different* type of kingdom
There is nothing excessive, or flashy
There's no red carpets or royal carriages
This King and this kingdom have different priorities

The coronation of King Charles the third will take place on May 6
This is the ceremony where he will be officially recognised
as the King over the commonwealth
The ceremony will be full of pomp and circumstance
Military guards and parades
Streets lined with crowds
The cost of the coronation is estimated to be over 100 million pounds
King Charles will wear a 362 year-old crown
Encrusted with jewels worth 57 million US dollars

This is very different to King Jesus isn't it
King Jesus was born in a manger
King Jesus in his ministry had no permanent place to lay his head
He lived more like someone we might consider homeless

And here's another difference
The role of King Charles is largely that of a figurehead
He has no real power over the countries of the Commonwealth
He can do lots of charitable work
He can lobby for action on climate change
But he has no authority over his subjects

But King Jesus comes with real power
We've already seen that power to teach, heal, drive out demons, to raise the dead
But Jesus also has authority to judge
Look at verse 11
¹¹ If any place does not welcome you or listen to you, when you leave there, shake the dust
off your feet as a testimony against them."

To shake the dust of your feet
Is a symbol of judgement
If they don't want to welcome the message of the King
That is as good as rejecting the King
And if you say no to the King
Eventually he will give you what you want and he will also reject you

The apostle Paul once spoke to a group of intelligent people in Athens
In the Areopagus
He spoke about how God has made each one of us to reach out to him
And that none of us are too far from finding him
But he also gave this warning
Acts 17 verse 31

³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

He’s talking about Jesus

The one that God has established as Judge and King

The one that we will each face and give an account to for the life that God has given us

John Piper, the author and pastor

Reflected on his own journey of finding purpose and meaning in his life

In his book called “Don’t waste your life” he wrote this

You get one pass at life. That’s all. Only one. And the lasting measure of that life is Jesus Christ. That very plaque hung on the wall by our front door for years. I saw it every time I left home. What would it mean to waste my life? That was a burning question. Or, more positively, what would it mean to live well.

It’s a good question.

Well if Jesus is the King

And if he is bringing in the Kingdom of God

Then life is all about King Jesus

It’s as simple and as challenging that

To live well is to give your life for the cause of King Jesus

And to live poorly is to ignore or to reject Him

This brings us to the second point tonight which is Kingdom conflict

The kingdom of God coming through the ministry of Jesus and his disciples

Comes crashing into another kingdom

The ministry of the twelve is being done in Galilee under the human rule of Herod

Herod as we will soon see represents the Kingdom of self

Both of these kingdoms will come into conflict

That involves a hefty price

Verse 14

¹⁴ King Herod heard about it, because Jesus’s name had become well known. Some said, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that’s why miraculous powers are at work in him.” ¹⁵ But others said, “He’s Elijah.” Still others said, “He’s a prophet, like one of the prophets from long ago.”

¹⁶ When Herod heard of it, he said, “John, the one I beheaded, has been raised!”

If you started reading the gospel of Mark from chapter 1

Reading this verse would come as a bit of a shock

Because this gospel started with John the Baptist

John was the prophet like Elijah

The messenger of God who was preparing the way for God’s promised King

John was the one who baptized Jesus His cousin, his King

John’s important role was to be the support act to Jesus

The one who said that Jesus would be far greater than himself

But the last we saw John was back in chapter 1

John the Baptist was arrested back then and we were not told why

And now we see that John has paid the ultimate price for serving God

He’s been killed at the hands of King Herod

And we're going to find out why

But first let me give you some sordid background to the players who caused John's death
Herod, his wife Herodias and her daughter Salome

Let's do a bit of family tree work in the Jewish royal family
Now the first thing to note
Is that the royal family has limited power
Because everyone in Israel is under the power of the Roman empire
Israel is an occupied land under their rule
The Roman emperor and the senate have real power
And they allow this royal family of Herod the Great to have some limited powers
In fact the Herod mentioned in our passage
Was not a King at all
He was a wannabe King
His official title was "Tetrarch" meaning he governed one fourth of the country
As approved by Rome over the northern part of Israel around Lake Galilee

There's a lot of Herods mentioned in the bible so let's sort a few of them out
We start with Herod the Great
This is the Herod we hear about at Christmas
The one who ordered a slaughter of boys
about Jesus's age after learning of his birth from the magi
This was an insecure attempt to try and get rid of any contender to his power
Herod the Great had 7 sons to 5 different women
These include Aristobolus, Herod Philip and Herod Antipas
They were half-brothers to each other, same Dad but three different mothers
The Herod mentioned in our passage tonight is Herod Antipas the Tetrach
Now here is where it gets deliciously complicated
Aristobolus has five children including a daughter named Herodias
That's the Herodias in our passage tonight
Herodias marries her uncle Herod Philip
And they have a daughter Salome
That's the daughter of Herodias in the passage
Not mentioned by name
Herodias divorces her husband/uncle Herod Philip
For the purpose of hooking up with another uncle Herod Antipas
Okay are you getting a picture of what this family is like?

In order for Herod Antipas to hook up with Herodias
He also divorces Phasaelis (daughter of King Aretas of Nabatea)
A neighbouring kingdom to Israel
This divorce came back to bite Herod Antipas later
And thus ends our lesson in ancestry.com
Now have you got a snapshot of that family tree?
The whole situation is pretty seedy
We know who the two main players are in our passage
Herod and Herodias
And these two are the King and Queen of the Kingdom of Self-interest
The things they do are completely motivated by their self-interest
And are utterly sinful before a Holy God

And their sin has devastating consequences for themselves and for others
And John the Baptist calls them out for their sin

The Old Testament law in Leviticus 20 says

²¹ “If a man marries his brother’s wife, it is an act of impurity; he has dishonored his brother. They will be childless.

No fear or favour – John the Baptist calls it as he sees it under God’s Kingdom

He tells Herod that what he and Herodias are doing is sinful

Herodias doesn’t like this criticism

She doesn’t hold back

Her first option is to silence John by killing him

That’s an interesting way of dealing with your critics isn’t it?

The self-interest of Herodias is quite straightforward

Ambitious, driven

She will do whatever it takes to get whatever she wants

Even if that means murder

In my almost fifty years of life I’m glad that I’ve only met one or two people like that

People who would do anything to get what they want

To lie, cheat, steal, throw anyone under the bus

Herod’s self-interest is more complicated

I think he’s much more like most of us

Even though he also was murderous in the end

He took a longer way to get there

As we will see in the passage,

Herod is also lustful, arrogant, people pleasing, fearful, proud, influenced, indecisive

In other words, just like us

Even though John is critical of Herod

Herod’s first option is not to kill him but to listen to him

Look at verse 20

²⁰ because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing he was a righteous and holy man.

When Herod heard him he would be very perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him.

Herod is shown in this passage as not being sure who to listen to

In one ear is his wife/niece Herodias telling him to kill John

But in the other ear is John

Teaching Herod from the Bible

Telling him what God wants

Herod recognizes that there is something different about John

Something from God – John is holy and righteous

But Herod can’t figure out what to do with his teaching

He’s intrigued but he’s also indecisive

He’s easily influenced one way or the other

Herodias on the other hand, is very decisive about what she wants

Her self-interest means she’s willing to manipulate both her daughter and her husband

Verse 21

²¹ An opportune time came on his birthday, when Herod gave a banquet for his nobles, military commanders, and the leading men of Galilee. ²² When Herodias's own daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me whatever you want, and I'll give it to you."

²³ He promised her with an oath: "Whatever you ask me I will give you, up to half my kingdom." ²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" "John the Baptist's head," she said.

Salome and her dance have inspired much artwork over the years
Often depicting her as a seductress
But it's more likely that Salome was just 13 or 14 years old
Not much older than a child
I don't believe Salome had much choice or agency in her mother's schemes
It's likely she danced for Herod at the prompting of her mother Herodias
We're not told if her dance was sexually suggestive or not
But I believe that Herodias knew what her husband Herod was like
After some food, and plenty of alcohol at this feast, people around to impress
She knew that Herod would lust over Salome after her dance
Because men don't make that kind of promise
"Ask me whatever you want, and I'll give it to you."
When they're thinking with their brains
Herod is making this promise with another part of his anatomy
So remember the family tree
Here you've got a young teenage girl
Who's lusted after by a middle aged man
Who just happens to be her great uncle
As well as his step-daughter
It's a really classy situation

Verse 25

²⁵ At once she hurried to the king and said, "I want you to give me John the Baptist's head on a platter immediately." ²⁶ Although the king was deeply distressed, because of his oaths and the guests he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ The king immediately sent for an executioner and commanded him to bring John's head.

It's shocking scene
Imagine a 13 year-old girl
Asking for the head of a religious opponent at the behest of her mother's self-interest
And Herod is trapped by his own self-interest
He's just made an outlandish promise to Salome in front of everyone
And she's requested the death of someone he feared and enjoyed listening to
But if he doesn't deliver on his extravagant promise
Well then he's going to suffer the shame of not keeping his word
At his own birthday party
And will lose face in front of his guests – the who's who of Galilee
This self-proclaimed "king" has been snookered by a teenage girl
Meanwhile, Herodias is saying to herself "Check mate"
I got what I want – John's head on a platter

And that's how the passage ends
With John's disciples burying the headless corpse

of someone who was martyred for doing his job
It's just a really gruesome episode
And the question is why?
Why would Mark include this grim tale in this book?

I think it's Mark is contrasting two kingdoms
The kingdom of Jesus and John where you say and do what God wants
And then you get the kingdom that Herod & Herodias represent - Sinful Self-Interest
It's not only John who dies for this Kingdom
But Mark is preparing us for the moment when King Jesus himself
Will die at the hands of this Kingdom of self-interest

Mark is preparing us to answer the question

Which Kingdom for you?

Which Kingdom are you going to choose to live under?
The Kingdom of Jesus
Or the Kingdom of Herod
The Kingdom where you give up your life for the sake of others
Or The Kingdom where you are consumed by serving yourself?

Before you decide

Do you want to hear what happened to Herod and Herodias?
Remember Herod's first marriage?
The marriage to Phasaelis that he ended in order to marry Herodias
According to the first century Jewish historian Josephus
King Aretas of Nabatea, Herod's first father-in-law
Declared war with Herod
Probably didn't like how his daughter was treated
And Aretas destroyed Herod's army
Causing Herod to lose face
Herodias, not one to go down without a fight urged her husband Herod
To appeal to the Emperor Caligula for the official title of King rather than just tetrarch
This was out of jealousy
Because her own brother Agrippa had been granted a royal title from Rome
Then Agrippa in a cunning powerplay against his sister and brother-in-law
Tells Caligula that Herod Antipas is plotting against the Roman Empire
Caligula strips Herod of all of his territory and power and gives it to Agrippa
Caligula then banishes Herod and Herodias to Gaul where they eventually die in obscurity

The historian Josephus was not a Christian but a Jew who sympathized with the Romans
He writes this in his historical account called the Antiquities:

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God and was a very just punishment for what he did against John called the Baptist. For Herod had him killed, although he was a good man and had urged the Jews to exert themselves to virtue...

Jews and Christians of the day would have seen that Herod's fall
Was the work of God's judgement
You can't pretend to be king and get away with it
You can't kill the servants of God and escape His judgement

The first readers of Mark's gospel would have read this somewhere around 70 AD
And Herod died in 39 AD
So this is within one generation
Everyone reading this would have known what happened to Herod
His kingdom of self-interest did not last

Let me ask you that question again

Which kingdom for you?

But you might say

I'm nothing like Herod and Herodias

I'm not murderous

I'm not consumed with jealous ambition

I'm not going to throw away a marriage just because of lust

That could never happen to me

I've lived for long enough now to know this

No one wakes up one morning and decides to be the King of Self-Interest

You get there with a series of small but important decisions along the way

I have a friend Tamas

We met at a Scripture Union camp at the end of year 12

And we became good friends at uni

And we played in a band together for a few years

Tamas has gone on to be a much more talented artist than me

While at uni Tamas lived at one of the residential colleges

And he would often tell me about life in college

Which involved students indulging in a lot of sex and alcohol

He told me that he made a decision early on at college to identify as a follower of Jesus

And that meant no to sex and no to drinking excessively

And at college, there was that immense pressure to fit in

Often applied from older year students to the first years

One night at college in his first O-Week

Tamas told me about a particularly excessive alcoholic bender

There were rubbish bins filled with drunken vomit

And people were so drunk that they didn't notice one of the first year girls was unconscious

Except for Tamas that is

Because he wasn't drunk he saw the girl struggling to breathe and he called the paramedics

Because he wasn't drunk he could make sure she was okay until they arrived

Everyone else was drunk not only on booze

They were drunk on self-interest

It's all those small decisions isn't it

Should I let them know I'm a Christian or worry about what they think of me

Should I get pissed tonight or should I look out for others

Should I take advantage of that girl when she's drunk or should I help her?

Tamas answered all those questions

No to self

Yes to King Jesus

Yes to the good of others

Herod could have gone down a different path

At one point He was listening to the teaching of John

But Herod ended up where he did because of those small and important decisions.
Should I stay with my first wife or give in to my lust?
Should I listen to my second wife or should I keep listening to John?
Should I fight the urge to look at my step-daughter that way?
Should I open my mouth to impress my friends or should I just keep quiet?
Should I be swayed by what others think or should I not care?
Should I fear man or should I fear God?

You know how Herod answered these questions
He answered them all with “Yes” to self-interest
He may have dabbled with the Kingdom of God
And if he’d kept listening to John he might have gone the way of King Jesus
But in the end Herod chose himself over Jesus

This is what Luke says in chapter 23 after the arrest of Jesus
⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. ⁹ He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him.

Let me ask you again which kingdom for you?

Some of you here tonight
Are trying to have a foot in each kingdom
Changing how you behave depending on who you’re around
You’re good little Christians here on Sundays and at Bible Study
And you’re a different person around your mates
The thing is King Jesus deserves more than one of your feet
This King demands your whole life
He doesn’t want indecision between him and self
He wants you to deny yourself and to throw your lot in with him
Learn from the indecision of Herod
He wanted a bit of both and in the end he lost it all

Some of you tonight are wondering about the cost of following King Jesus

Let me speak about that
I want to be honest about the cost
I don’t want to sugarcoat Christianity and say that life is pain-free when you follow Jesus
It’s not, we’ve seen that tonight with the example of John the Baptist

In Mark chapter 8 Jesus says to those who considered followed him
“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

The cross for his hearers was not a thing of beauty you wore around your neck
The cross was an executioner’s tool
A symbol of shame and certain death
Jesus is saying that to be a true disciple of His kingdom
You must be willing to pay the ultimate price
Just like John the Baptist

And so if you want to live in this kingdom
You have to count the cost
Because it may cost you your life
You will endure shame and rejection by your culture
It may mean making decisions that will make you much poorer than your friends
It may mean disappointing your parents expectations
It may mean staying single and childless
It may mean giving up a secure and successful career
It may mean moving to a less glamorous suburb or country
All for the sake of the King

As I speak there are millions of followers of Jesus around the world right now
Paying that price in prison
Dealing with the grief of churches and homes destroyed
Loved ones killed for the sake of the King
There are some in this church who know the price of this
Whose families have rejected them
Who have lost their businesses
Who can never return to their countries of birth
Because they will be killed

Why would anyone do this?
Why would I pick up my cross for the King?
Because the King picked up his cross for me

Mark 10 verse 44

⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Do you think the Herods of the world would give their life for you?
Do you think the ambitious bosses who you give extra hours at work for?
Do you think they would sacrifice themselves for you?
Do you think the friends who get smashed with you on a Saturday night
Do you think they would die in your place when the crunch comes?
In the Kingdom of Self how many would give themselves for the sake of the other?
Jesus would
No Jesus did.
As a ransom for me and for you
The King paid the ultimate price
Because he loved you
The cost of following this King is high
But he paid that price for you
Why wouldn't you pay it for him?

My last application is ambassadors for the King

The Twelve who were sent out by Jesus
Were his ambassadors
The apostle Paul spoke of himself as an ambassador of Christ
In 2 Corinthians 5 he said

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

I'm speaking now to those of you who have planted both feet in the camp of King Jesus
Those of you who identify as followers of Jesus
It's a good thing for the kingdom of Jesus to grow
King Jesus wants people to know Him because it's good for them
I want you to think of yourself as ambassadors of Jesus
Whether that's in the workplace
Your uni lecture theatre
Your circle of friends
Your share house
The kitchen you share with others at college
Let everything you say and do point others to Jesus
Because you know the secret to life
You know what will give people peace and purpose in their life
It's this: be reconciled to God
People turn to weed, alcohol, meth, food, money and porn
Because of pain, trauma, fear, guilt and shame
You have something so much better to offer them
Be reconciled to God
The King who died for their sin
The King who will never leave them and forsake them when they suffer
Being an ambassador for Christ is not a role
It's a mindset whenever you make those small but important decisions
For the sake of King Jesus
Turning up to church and bible study
Spending time with God in the Bible and in prayer
Serving regularly in humility
Inviting your friend to church or to the Christian union
Giving up a shifts at work to attend or serve on a camp or Beach mission
Going on that mission trip and seeing where God leads you with that

Tamas and I served on Sorrento Beach Mission while we were at uni
And it was there he met Bron who went on to direct that Beach Mission
Tamas and Bron got married
And they went to serve in Myanmar for seven years
In Aid, Development and Public Health
They live in Melbourne now with their daughters
Tamas is a lecturer at the uni we once attended
An expert on democracy, aid and development in Myanmar
Bron is a GP specializing in women's health
She was part of the medical team that cared for the people trapped in the
Public housing towers in Kensington during lockdown
Tamas painted this portrait of Bron during this time
Bron and Tamas are some of the most selfless, humble, compassionate people that I know
They are heroes to me
Everything they do, they do for others and for King Jesus
They would be embarrassed by the things I am saying tonight
They would just say they are ordinary Christians

Who attend a local church in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne
They would just say they are servants of the King
And that's the point isn't it
This is how servants of the King live
Each and everyday making small decisions for others and for their King
Last year a group of us celebrated Tamas' birthday and 30 years of friendship
When I was with all these friends
I had to pinch myself that my heroes are also my friends
Beautiful, loving, loyal friends
Friends who love others with courage and commitment
Friends who live for their King Jesus
I'll be honest,
I have paid very little cost to be in the Kingdom of Jesus
He has given me so, so much more
Choose King Jesus
Choose His kingdom
Because I want you to be blessed as much as I have been