

Costly Truth Telling

Frankston Uniting Church

Mark 6:14 - 29, Lamentations 1:1 - 6



In a big dose of Biblical irony, the man of the wilderness who ate locusts and wild honey meets his death in a grand royal banquet. In one of the few Gospels stories to not feature Jesus, we see what can happen when you speak uncomfortable truth to power. Although the story is complex enough to raise questions about who has the power and who pays the cost. You can see this story as a sort of warning to the reader about what is going to

happen to Jesus, with all the complexities of power and loss in the crucifixion. While there is some confusion in the text, possibly caused by later scribes, about the name of the wife and the daughter, there is no confusion about the sin that John the baptiser accuses Herod of committing. Herod, the younger son of the Herod we talked about in the story of the Magi, had divorced his first wife and married the divorced wife of his half-brother Philip. That is the uncomfortable truth; it's the king's job to uphold the law, not to flagrantly break it! However, it seems that the power that the truth exposed lies not with the king but with the aggrieved woman. "How dare this country preacher challenge my efforts to do the best I can for my daughter and threaten my position and life!" The inference of the story is that Herod imprisoned John for his own safety. And the cost of the truth came to more than just John. Mark seems to be implying that Herod had some faith and liked to listen to John, it must have been a wrench to be caught in his own promises and shamed into ordering John's death. And who knows what the cost of this event was to Herod's family relationships. And we can only imagine the cost in grief to John's disciples. Truth is important, but truth can be costly and uncomfortable.

Like the flip side to the story of John and Herod, Lamentations presents us with the other side of truth telling - telling the truth to ourselves. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was a watershed moment for the people of God in Judah. Not just in their history and culture, but in their faith and theology. This was the grand "Why?", that sent the people searching through history, scripture, prophecy, and theology. They had seen their cousins in the northern Kingdom overthrown by the Assyrians and said, "Aha, that's because they abandoned the true faith and left the Temple. We are holding to faith in God and are safe." Now, what could they say. Was Marduk, the god of Babylon stronger than Yahweh, the God of their ancestors? Unthinkable. Had the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob abandoned them? Why? Or was it the uncomfortable truth, that, like their ancestors in the wilderness wandering, they had abandoned God? That is the whole point of the book of Lamentations. An uncomfortable truth. You can feel the pain of telling this truth in Lamentations. Not just the grief of destruction, but the female imagery that pictures the grieving in the wailing of mothers and widows. And you can see in a number of the Psalms, how much that truth was resisted and denied until it became unavoidable. Psalms that call on God to take revenge for the destruction, Psalms filled with anger and sadness, but no accountability. The people of Judah, the remnants of the people of God, had to face the uncomfortable truth that religion - festivals and Temple and ritual - was not enough. The covenant that the people agreed up through Moses had a big IF in it. IF you are faithful, IF you hold to the Law, IF you seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly

with God, then you will be the people of God, and God will uphold the covenant. The cost of this truth telling was more than just the grieving of destruction and enslavement, the cost was to pride and the bad but very comforting theology of passive religion. Truth is important, but truth can be costly and uncomfortable.

Australia's atrocious record on whistle-blowers shows that we still have a society of power that is uncomfortable with truth. So uncomfortable that the truth of our involvement in the affairs of East Timor is hidden in secret trials. And if the story of John the baptiser confronting Herod the adulterer was all that we had, this could be a sermon about those faithful to Jesus - the Way, the Truth, and the Life - taking up the task of speaking uncomfortable truth to power. But we also have the story behind Lamentations, and we face the uncomfortable old aphorism that when you point the finger at someone you have three fingers pointing back at you.

Are we faithful, with our power and power structures, to the calls to truth and justice? Are we stuck in comfortable religion rather than in relationship with an active, real God? Are we too quick to see moral failure and don't look deeper to underlying issues and causes?

Truth is so very important. Not just the truth embodied in Jesus - that God is love and grace and not a hard taskmaster demanding moral perfection - but lives of trustworthiness and truthfulness. It's the foundation of trust and real relationships. But often, through power, through unexamined trust, or through simple drift in relationships, truth comes with a cost. A cost both the one being challenged with the truth - a cost in reputation, in pride, and in real cost - and a cost to the one doing the challenging - a cost in relationships, in accusations, and possibly a physical cost. But that cost shouldn't cause us to shy away from telling the truth and allowing injustice to go unchallenged. And the other side of the coin is recognising that the cost of truth shouldn't cause us to shy away from telling the truth to ourselves. Truth telling is important. Even if it is costly and uncomfortable.