

Mark 6.14-29; Ephesians 1.3-14

A few months ago when I first knew I was going to come here to St. Thomas', I didn't expect that my first sermon would be on the story of how John the Baptist lost his head.

It's not a story that people get excited to preach about! It's actually quite unpleasant. It is violent and shocking, Jesus is nowhere to be seen, and where oh where is the love of God when your head has just been given to a girl as a present?!

While the gospels are mostly telling us about Jesus' life, Jesus' ministry, how he cared for people and healed the sick, it seems out of place that Mark writes about the death of John in such detail.

However, there are some explanations. For one, it answers the simple question of 'what happened to him?' Now you know. But more interestingly, this story actually has a lot of similarities with Jesus' story.

Both John and Jesus are calling people to find God in a new way. And everything John does is about the coming of Jesus.

John the Baptist was someone who came before, who was prophetic. John's whole ministry was to get people ready for Jesus, to point people in the right direction - not to say 'look at me', but 'look at him, the Son of God'. And even in this awful death, John is also foretelling what will happen to Jesus, that he will be killed because of his teaching.

I think that although the similarities are not very obvious, between, this story of John losing his head, and how Jesus died a few years later, they are both about perseverance. Perseverance, even when it became dangerous and turned people against them.

John the Baptist was bold. He wasn't afraid to speak out against what he knew was wrong. It would have been easy to back down, to say that he had made a mistake. I wonder if, while he sat in prison, he came close to saying that he had been wrong. Was he tempted to abandon his message in order to be set free?

But John knew that he was called to tell people about Jesus and about God, and he stuck to it, despite it making powerful people angry.

So in the midst of this awful story, perhaps we can find a glimmer of good news, of something encouraging.

Now I don't know about you, but sometimes I find it really hard work to persevere with something that is difficult. When I was younger I was learning to play the piano, and I knew that to get better, you had to practice every day. But sometimes I wasn't in the mood, or I would rather do something else, so I would put it off and put it off until it simply didn't get done. But then, when I was about 12, the Lord of the Rings films came out, and I loved them. My Mum bought me a piano book so I could learn to play the music from the films. This was very exciting, so even though it was quite hard, I was so determined to be able to play the music that I practiced all the time, until finally I could do it. And I was so proud of myself! I think my poor family must have got completely fed up of hearing the same tunes over and over again, but it was a good lesson in perseverance!
And in faith we need perseverance as well.

Having your head given to someone as a present is pretty awful, but John shows us an amazing faith - he knew that he was teaching people the word of God, and so he persevered even when he was put in prison and was killed for it. And later on in the Gospels, Jesus too willingly accepts his own death, because he knew that he was in God's hands. They had faith, which held them even through terrible things happening to them.

So my question for us this morning is, what enables us to have faith? A strong faith that can support us even through difficult times. We can find an answer at the end of the reading for today from the book of Ephesians. It says, 'you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit'. So we hear, we believe, and we are given the Holy Spirit by God, through Christ, so that we too can persevere in faith. The Holy Spirit helps us, and is how God is with us and in us, always.

The writer of Ephesians explains that if we have faith, we are children of God, we are blessed people of God. And because we are people of God, the purpose of our lives should be to share God's blessings with others. This is what John the Baptist, and then Jesus, model for us - even though today's story is a bit gruesome - they led the way to God, and told the story of faith so that we could hear it and be blessed, and carry on blessing others with it in return.

Both John and Jesus are looking forwards to a different world where everyone can know God's love and receive the Holy Spirit. And amazingly we can even find God at work in this morning's gospel reading in the persevering faith of John the Baptist, who believed in God's message.

Now I'm fairly confident that we won't end up with our heads being given away as presents... But we can follow the example of John the Baptist by telling people about Jesus. Even just in our everyday lives, when we are chatting to our next door neighbour, or being patient in the supermarket queue, we too can point the way to Jesus and to God. We can pray that the Holy

Spirit will help us to be bold in our faith, and we can rejoice that we are the blessed children of God.

Amen.