

# Proclaiming God's Justice Will Draw Wrath of Powerful

The story of John the Baptist is a familiar narrative to most Christians. We imagine John as a wild man preaching in the desert about repentance and calling people to be baptized. We also visualize John baptizing Jesus, a significant starting point to Jesus' ministry. But when we think of John, we probably most often recall his death at the hands of King Herod. While all the Synoptic Gospels tell us about John's death, Mark narrates John's arrest and death in a quite interesting way that implies something deeply theological about the vulnerability of those who would dare to be prophets of God.

Readers of the second gospel are told very early in the narrative that John was arrested. Yet, what seems odd is that this is all the information we are given about the Baptizer's fate at this point in Mark's story. In fact, we may just skip by Mark's comment about John's arrest in chapter one and treat it as an incidental remark written as a segue into focusing on Jesus.

While the comment might simply be a transition into telling about Jesus, it is written for a very specific reason. The telling of John's arrest immediately before the narration of Jesus going out and proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near is for the purpose of linking the arrest of John with the preaching of Jesus. By connecting the two stories at this point, Mark foreshadows that the fate of Jesus will be like that of John. And the preaching of justice will be the cause of that fate.

A similar link is made between John's death and the sending out of the 12 disciples in Mark 6. In reading chapter 6 one would have to admit that the structure is a bit strange. First, Jesus speaks about the dishonor he is given in his home region, and then he sends out the 12 disciples on mission. After we are told that the disciples are sent out, then we are told, in a complete narrative, the details of John's death. But what is interesting is that just after narrating John's execution, Mark then tells us that the disciples returned to Jesus to report on their mission.

The structure of intertwining the sending out of the disciples and then their return with the narration of John's death sandwiched in between is a technique

used by the author to tie the fate of the disciples with that of John. From a literary perspective, Mark is saying that their going out to proclaim the gospel is a risky endeavor that makes them vulnerable to the powers who seek to silence God's message of justice.

There are other passages in Mark that suggest what I am stating here, but these are enough to raise a pertinent question. How does proclaiming the gospel make us vulnerable to the powers of injustice?

To get at the answer to this question, we need to refute some common misconceptions about preaching the gospel. Many think it is simply evangelism, where the goal is to convert everyone in the world to Christianity by trying to persuade them that they "need Jesus." This seems to me to be a very limited understanding of Jesus' practice of preaching. For one reason, it is mainly, and wrongly I might add, intent on getting people to heaven. For another, it is very individualistic and focused mostly on the spiritual needs of people.

While addressing the spiritual needs of people has some legitimacy, proclaiming the gospel is not simply evangelism. Proclaiming the gospel is speaking the truth about what God desires for humanity - justice in all its forms. While proclaiming the gospel is a call to repent from sin, it is more than anything a call to repent from humanity's greatest sin, injustice and oppression, whether directly or indirectly, toward those most vulnerable.

The reason that prophets of God's justice like John, Jesus, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., just to name a few, face persecution, is that they are willing to speak truth to power, even the religious power that often sanctions the continuing oppression of the most vulnerable. In doing so, these prophets not only side with the struggles of the marginalized as a form of resisting the status quo of injustice, they also boldly proclaim that God sides with the vulnerable and against the powers that rule.

While we must identify with the vulnerable of our world through our close association with them and service to them, we must also be prophets of truth that call to repentance the powers of society that set up structures of violence and injustice that entrap the vulnerable. But becoming those prophets will set us on a collision course that makes us vulnerable to retribution from those powers.

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