

Getting to Know our Faith and our Church

In this issue I turn to reflect on various questions that have been asked about St John the Baptist, patron saint of our parish church in Frome – a future issue will reflect a little on St Katharine to whom the church at Woodlands is dedicated.

St John the Baptist is unusual amongst the saints in that he is commemorated on several days in the Christian year. We keep our patronal festival on 24th June, the day when his birth is remembered: He is also remembered on 29th August, the day recalling his death by beheading.

In the narrative of Mark's Gospel the account of John's death occurs in chapter 6 where King Herod (that is Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea born before 20BC and died after 39AD) has heard of Jesus and his teaching and popular following and Herod is recorded as saying "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him".

Mark then recalls Herod's imprisonment of John the Baptist motivated by John's criticism of Herod for marrying his brother's wife. Mark also notes that Herodias had a grudge against John.

It is helpful to understand a little more of the family background here [see the extract of the Herodian family tree opposite]: Herod Antipas was a son of Herod the Great by one of his many wives, Malthace of Samaria. Herod Antipas had many half siblings, amongst them Herod II who was son of Herod the Great by a wife called Mariamne II.

Herodias was a granddaughter of Herod the Great by a line from a different wife, also a Mariamne, through Aristobolus IV, a son whom Herod the Great had executed in 7BC. Herodias' mother Berenice was also a first cousin of her father and of Herod II, Herod Antipas and their assorted half-siblings. Herod the Great had his granddaughter Herodias betrothed to Herod II and Salome was their daughter.

Herod Antipas had been married to Phasaelis, daughter of King Aretas of Nabatea and having fallen for his half-brother's wife Herodias when they met in Rome he divorced his wife Phasaelis and Herodias divorced her husband Herod II. Josephus records that "*Herodias took upon her to confound the laws of our country, and divorced herself from her husband while he was alive, and was married to Herod Antipas*".

John the Baptist's protests were against a marriage where both parties were wilfully divorcing in order to marry another, and where the parties involved were closely related as Herodias was half-niece to Herod Antipas as also to his half-brother Herod II.

It is worth noting that the consequences of Herod Antipas divorcing his wife Phasaelis were far more serious than Mark's Gospel records: Her father King Aretus of Nabatea with whom there had long been tensions over territory on the border of Perea and Nabatea was provoked into war which proved disastrous for Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas' army suffered a serious defeat when the Nabatean army was reinforced by fugitives from the Tetrarchy of Iturea and Trachonitis, which Herod Antipas's half-brother Philip had been ruling. A counter-

offensive was ordered by the Emperor Tiberius but after news of his death reached the commander of the two legions that had been sent they were withdrawn. A few years later Herod Antipas' nephew, Agrippa who had been made King over the Tetrarchy formerly governed by Philip, accused him of conspiracy against the new emperor Caligula and Herod Antipas was sent, with his new wife Herodias, into exile in Gaul where he died.

It is Herod Agrippa that is referred to in Acts 12 where Luke notes that "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread.⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover."

As we unravel the complexities of the Herodian dynasty we see the people in power who will have felt the cutting edge of some of Jesus' parables – Herod Archelaus, the subject of Joseph's dream in Matthew 2, may well be the nobleman alluded to in the parable of Luke 19: "A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return ... But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'"

By taking time to make sure that we don't get our Herod's confused and understanding something of the political context the words of John the Baptist as he challenged Herod Antipas become even stronger and the parables richer as they challenge injustice and corruption both then and now.