



Struggling to be Holy? | Rev'd Hannah Mears

Sermon for 6th Sunday after Trinity | Mark 6:14-29

This Sunday's Gospel reading records the final hours of the life and ministry of John the Baptist. The passage ends with the vivid description of his murder inside a prison cell. Then we read 'the soldier brought his head on a platter.' It doesn't make easy reading. Apart from the brutal nature of John's death, I'm also struck by the response of King Herod. We read, 'for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man; and protected him.' There was something about John's character which bothered Herod, so much so, that he had tried to keep him safe. We later learn that Herod was 'deeply grieved' at the request from the girl to behead John. Herod knew that John was a holy man. What do we mean by holiness? Holiness is God's own character, it's who God is. This means that Herod saw something of God in John the Baptist's life. And it challenged him.

When I started ministry training my friends came over one day to visit. They laughed their heads off when they saw this book on my desk! (Struggling to be Holy) It's written by Judy Hirst who wrote about her own struggle with holiness as she lived in Durham surrounded by the Saints of Northumbria! She writes about how she assumed holiness was only for people who lived by strict discipline, or for individuals who could be away from people for weeks of silence— she assumed holiness was for only those who could be devout, serene, peaceful, controlled and contained. Maybe you can relate to her struggle. Maybe you think of a bar that you can't reach as if holiness is beyond you – not really for everyday people. Or maybe it brings up negative connotations of someone being 'holier than thou' polishing their own halo for everyone to see!

But what if we've misunderstood holiness. What if holiness is less about mustering all our efforts to behave better, to try harder, and more about being able to entrust ourselves to the God who loves us. The truth is that we can't make ourselves holy however hard we might try! Maybe that's why John the Baptist prayed, 'less of me Lord, more of you.' Speaking about monastic life Brother Luigi Gioia said: 'when the new young monks first arrive they don't look holy and they're not holy, the middle-aged monks who have been in the monastery a while look holy but they know they are not holy, and the old monks they don't look holy....but they are holy.'

If holiness isn't about what we look like but who we're becoming, what are the signs of holiness in ordinary people like you and me? People who inhabit holiness tend to show characteristics like compassion, humility, wisdom, integrity. Holiness is often evident in people who have suffered deeply themselves but have prayerfully resisted bitterness, they're often non-judgemental, self-less, they are often at peace with themselves 'warts and

all' and because of this they have a great ability to laugh at themselves too! But, there's another side to holiness. Holy people can also be incredibly challenging because they will oppose injustices and seek out truth. This means it may at times feel uncomfortable to be in their presence as it was uncomfortable for Herod to be in the company of John the Baptist. This list isn't exhaustive, but these characteristics of holiness all describe the character of Christ. From compassion shown to those in need to the turning of the tables in the temple, Jesus has revealed to us the holiness of God.

I help people in this diocese explore their calling, and we are all called as disciples of Jesus to use our gifts for the building of God's kingdom. As I help people explore their vocation we often think together about 'formation.' Formation is about allowing ourselves to be acted upon (squeeze) by the God who loves us. The clay can't form itself into something attractive, but the potter can! When we place both the strong and the damaged parts of ourselves into the hands of God then he can form us into something unique and beautiful. Real change and transformation happen when we open ourselves to God by receiving his gift of unconditional love and forgiveness. When we bring before God the whole of who we are – the highs and lows, the joys, the disappointments, the successes and the failures, it is then that we allow ourselves to be shaped and moulded by the Holy Spirit and we become our whole best selves. When we welcome Christ into the clutter of our lives spending time in his presence, that's when we grow in Christ-like character. When we come to God as we are – that's when the good stuff happens – that's when God can help us to become more fully ourselves.

Maybe the real struggle with holiness is believing that God loves us enough to help us to change and grow! The good news is that we have a generous God who wants to spend time with us. God's love is real and the more we come to believe that the more we will be able to risk bringing before God the whole of who we really are not just the good bits we pop on social media.

John the Baptist was called by God to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. He declared to the people 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'... The path to holiness is a long one, and yes, it's a struggle. But, we're invited to offer our whole lives afresh into the potter's hands. And if we risk this, we can be confident that God will form and shape us into people who bring life and blessing to the world....and even at times make things a bit uncomfortable.

May it be so.

Amen!