

Obstacles to Action

When I was young I always wondered why the drug companies were so insensitive to the needs of children. If they were so good at mixing chemicals, why couldn't an aspirin taste like cherry pie? Why couldn't cough syrup taste like pancake syrup? It gave rise to the attractiveness of such theories as what were reported among the Africans that my wife knew in her youth: The effectiveness of the medicine is in direct proportion to its distastefulness, the power of the injection was in direct proportion to its sting. It just illustrates that great cosmic principle that there will always be resistance to good things.

Take today's Gospel, for instance. John had denounced Herod for taking his brother's wife while his brother was still alive, so Herod jailed him. But he liked John and sought to protect him. Herodias was not so inhibited by scruples. Her daughter's erotic dance got Herod to lose control of his passions. He made a rash promise and Herodias pounced on the chance to silence the voice of conscience. Of this Chrysostom says, "Do you see what swearing does? It cuts off the heads of the prophets."

Resistance to goodness is not merely perversity. The story of Herod and John the Baptist is the description of the dynamics of a battle in the age-old war between good and evil, between the Truth and the Lie, between reality and fantasy, between God and pride. We engage the battle on two fronts. The one we notice first is always external. In the Gospel lesson it takes the form of Herodias and her underhanded ways. In your life it may take the form of someone who has ulterior motives, or whose actions are particularly irksome, or laws that you do not believe to be just, or leaders in our communities who seem to work against the common good. Addressing these resistances involves action in the name of God's love, truth and justice. Perhaps it cost John his head, but not his voice. Perhaps it will cost you something, too, but never your witness, or the benefit to your soul. The front we battle hardest is within. We are all Herod, a mixture of good intentions and unbridled passions, glorious gifts and unnerving vulnerability. The battle, lost by Herod, is to do what is loving, just and true. The strategic battleground is always within the human soul. If we win within we will fight well without. If we lose within any victory without is God's incredible mercy. The individual battles may be lost, but in the end it is only possible for victory to go to the side that has any substance to it—and that is God. In every sense the war goes on but the final victory is already won.

If the victory is won, then, why do we continue to struggle? The struggle reveals our heart. Because of the battle we see the character of each of the main players in this story: Herod was a fool. Herodias was cruel and unfeeling. Her daughter was a milk sap. In the same way, the obstacles we face in the practice of godliness reveal our hearts. If you didn't accurately report your taxes, or you fudged on your age to buy a drink, if you found you hadn't been charged for a lipstick and did not go back, there is a part of you that is dishonest. If, however, you took food to your neighbor who was sick, kicked in an extra dollar in the offering for the food pantry, or let the jerk in front of you cut you off without getting angry, then there is obviously a part of you that is generous.

The struggle forges our will. According to extra-biblical sources, Herod had engineered to divorce his first wife, daughter of Aretas, king of Petra, and to separate Herodias from her first husband, his brother known as Phillip Herod. John called him on the carpet for it, and in response he jailed him. But then, caught between the people and his illegitimate wife, he sought to protect John, even as he held him in his dungeon. He had a pattern of making rash decisions. We set our patterns by the way we choose, too. The more often I respond to the struggle well the more virtuous my heart becomes. The more often I slide the other way the more bogged down with vices my heart becomes.

The struggle gives witness to the coming of the Kingdom. Chrysostom notes about John and Herod, "He cut off the head, but he did not cut off the voice." Even as we tell the story of John today his witness to integrity is

heard once again. Sometimes as we battle in the external area we achieve victory, and the world becomes more friendly to the Gospel. Other times we are defeated, but even in defeat the witness has gone out to the world that the Kingdom is coming near. No matter what the outcome, then, the battle itself ultimately serves as its own undoing. In the struggle we become who we are ultimately destined to become. In the struggle we gain the grace to participate in the final victory. In the kingdom ultimately there is no defeat.

An adaptation of a story by Brian Swimm goes like this: A hawk sat on a desert cactus one morning hungry. A rabbit ran in front of it, and he tried to catch it, but missed. He missed all day, and went to bed hungry. Being a religious hawk, that night he prayed, "God please slow the rabbits down so I can get something to eat tomorrow." God looked down from heaven and heard the prayer and smiled. "OK, son, I'll do that for you." The next day a rabbit ran in front of the hawk and the hawk caught it and ate his fill. But then the hawk was full and sat without flying for two days in the summer heat. The food he had eaten went to his hips and his belly, and when again he was hungry, catching the rabbit was again difficult. So he repeated the prayer, with the same answer and the same result. This cycle happened several times, until the rather rotund and out-of-shape hawk changed his prayer. "God, you know, I'm a hawk and all, but all this killing stuff is getting to me. Can you just let the rabbit be dead already?" And God looked down and smiled, and in the morning there was a dead rabbit lying below the cactus. However, when the hawk flew down to enjoy his breakfast he found that he had company. Big black birds with bald heads tried to push him off his meal. Hungry as he was he jumped into the fray and tumbled with one of them down a slope to the water tank. There they fell apart and the hawk caught sight of a reflection in the water. Standing there panting and heaving, were two black birds with bald heads--and no hawk in sight.

Perhaps it would be best if the pharmaceutical companies did not get the word: The obstacles we face as we live out our faith are necessary to the growth of our souls and the coming of the Kingdom.