

(Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29)

Sadly, in that tale John the Baptist was not the only one to lose his head! Herod's example of getting himself into a fine mess reminds us of the dangers of making rash promises. Perhaps not in such a public way, and presumably not with such awful consequences, we have all done it. We may have committed ourselves to something without thinking it through, or taken on a 'vanity project' in the heat of the moment. Hopefully, we learnt from our mistakes.

Herod's problem was that he had publicly said he would offer Herodias anything she wanted. His 'oath' illustrates the power of the spoken word. Each of us knows instinctively the importance of being 'a man (or woman) of our word', and the financial world bemoans the passing of the integrity captured in the phrase 'my word is my bond'. But the ultimate example of the power of the spoken word came 'in the beginning': in the creation story of Genesis we are told that when God said 'let there be...' it came into being. Truly, 'In the beginning was the Word'.

So none of us would take lightly making a public proclamation before God. From the promises made by a godparent at a christening, through the vows exchanged at a wedding, to the declarations said by someone about to be confirmed (or ordained!), we think it all through beforehand. But given the power latent in *any* word we say at any time, we can see how dangerous it can be to 'lose our head' and speak rashly.

Now before last Wednesday evening some people were confidently and publicly saying that the England football team would easily beat Denmark, that they were 'destined' for a place in today's final. Gareth Southgate the manager was not amongst them. There is no arrogance in him, just a calm, dignified humility and focus. He knows what he is doing; he has the respect of his players, and he respects them. As the Queen indicates, speaking of their 'spirit, commitment, and pride', in their words and actions Gareth Southgate and his players display a straightforward integrity – which surely makes them good role models.

In our first reading today, we heard about Amos and the word he received from God. Amos reminds the official priest Amaziah that unlike Amaziah he is not a 'professional', but rather a humble herdsman to whom God has given authority to speak as a prophet. The simple image of a plumbline shows the power of his God-given message to Israel, God's people: they were not being true to themselves or to God. There is no arrogance or rashness in that message; it is calm and focused; a clear, unambiguous pointer to how things are, and how things need to change. We could say that Amos displays a straightforward integrity – and that he too is a good role model.

The writer of our second reading, St Paul, is a much more complicated character. Prior to his dramatic conversion, his 'Road to Damascus' experience, he had said and done some rash things. But God had been able to work through Paul, redeeming his past mistakes, and speaking through him words of encouragement and nurture to the early

church – such as the one at Ephesus. And down the centuries God has spoken to countless others – including us – through the clarity of Paul’s teaching. It is St Paul who shows us that we cannot ‘achieve’ a right relationship with God by our own efforts; such ‘righteousness’ comes only through faith in Christ, in all that his death and resurrection signifies.

Listen to this heartfelt, post-conversion message from St Paul to the church at Philippi: ‘If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ...a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.’

He continues, ‘Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ...’

That lies behind what we heard him saying to the Ephesians in our second reading, ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who ...chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him.’

St Paul then, throughout his teaching, is pointing away from himself and the exclusiveness of the law to the integrity of the inclusive love of Christ. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, did the same. As John had said of Jesus at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’.

Yesterday, Paul – that’s curate, not saint! – was ordained as a priest. He now wears the mantle of priesthood, symbolised by the priest’s stole worn as a yoke as opposed to a sash. He has been given authority to speak – as a prophet when required – and to pronounce God’s forgiveness and God’s blessing. He has also been given the authority to stand at the altar and in presiding at the Eucharist to ‘decrease’ as he points to Christ.

In doing these things, Paul will use authorised words; he will fully ‘inhabit’ those words so that we can be sure that God is speaking to us through him. We will have confidence in him as he does so because we already know of Paul that he not only ‘talks the talk’ but ‘walks the walk’. He puts his faith into action. As he has said himself, he sees his primary calling to be that of a Christian: when he helps someone in need he knows that any committed Christian would do the same, priest or not.

Paul is a man of his word; his word is his bond. He does not shout about it or speak rashly; he prepares carefully, humbly listening to God and to others. And like his namesake St Paul and John the Baptist, in all things he points away from himself to Christ in whom he has a solid faith.

Paul can be assured of our prayerful and practical support as he grows into his new ministry as a priest. Whilst his words will carry a new authority it will be his actions that continue to speak even more loudly. As a committed Christian his straightforward integrity will make him a good role model to us all.

I close with words taken from the Collect for last week, a prayer for us all: 'Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church is governed and sanctified: hear our prayer which we offer for all your faithful people, that in their vocation and ministry [we] may serve you in holiness and truth.'

Amen.