Westlake Church Lausanne

Two Kings and Two Feasts
Matthew 14:1-21

As we've been going through Matthew recently, we've seen two things – Jesus has been facing increasing opposition from the religious elite, and he's been teaching about the kingdom of God. And in the passage we're going to look at this morning, it's as if those two things – opposition to Jesus and kingship come together. And we're going to see two very different men – both of whom are kings, both of whom have power, but the way they exercise that power is very different. And you only have to glance at the news to realise that whether it's an African President, or a Hollywood producer, this issue of power, and how we handle power matters hugely.

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We're going to look at three things: Dangerous Power, Compassionate Power and Transformative Power.

Dangerous Power
Chapter 13 ended with Matthew telling us that having told the kingdom parables we've been looking at over the last few weeks, Jesus returned to Nazareth, his home-town, and taught in their synagogue. But the response of his fellow Nazarenes was less than positive. In fact, Matthew tells us that 'they took offense at him' (13:57), and rejected him.

And now, through what happened to John the Baptist, Matthew gives us a foretaste of what that rejection of Jesus is going to look like.

Verse 1, 'At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus.' And this Herod is son of Herod the Great, king at the time of Jesus' birth. And he's called Tetrarch because, when his father died, his kingdom was divided in four, and the Roman occupying forces gave this Herod responsibility for one of those four areas. And that area included Galilee where Jesus' ministry is taking place.

And Herod hears of Jesus' growing fame, and just as we've seen others respond to Jesus in polarising ways, now we see Herod's response: the response of the man who holds the power in that region. And Matthew tells us that he badly misjudges Jesus. You see, whilst the people of Nazareth dismissed Jesus as no more than a carpenter, Herod also gets him wrong – but for different reasons.

Verse 2, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." So, whilst Jesus' neighbours in Nazareth think he's no more than a man, Herod thinks he's something *other* than a man. And he mixes a Jewish belief in resurrection with a superstitious Greek belief in spirits coming back to haunt you. You see, I don't think it's stretching it too far to see that Herod's conscience is pricking him. After all, why does he seemed concerned by the fact that John might have been raised from the dead? Because he put him to death in the first place.

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Verse 3, 'For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife.' And Philip was another of Herod the Great's sons, and another of the four rulers of his kingdom. But his wife Herodias had an affair with Herod the tetrarch, who was already married, and Herod and Herodias divorced their respective partners and married each other. Except, to marry your brother's wife, as Herod does here, was against Old Testament Law – it was seen as akin to incest. And yet Herod married her. It's interesting isn't it, that one of the dangers of power is that you can begin to think that you're above the law. That rules of conduct, or the law of the land, are for others, not for you.

Now, if you're in the sphere of influence of someone with power, sometimes you'll think twice about confronting them with hard truths, won't you – because there's this fear – 'if I say that, what will they do to me?' But John the Baptist was different, and he had the courage to call Herod out. And as a result Herod arrested him – because when you're someone, you don't want to be repeatedly confronted with uncomfortable truths, do you? In fact, Herod wanted to do more than just arrest him. Verse 5, 'He wanted to put him to death.' He wants John out of the way, permanently. His pride has been threatened, he's been exposed. As is so often the case, the skin of the powerful man is surprisingly thin. He has an image to maintain and John is threatening it.

And yet Herod doesn't kill him. Not to start with anyway. And Matthew tells us why: because 'He feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.' And so despite all his so-called power, Herod is deeply insecure – he's got to silence his opponent, and yet he dare not. And he doesn't make his decisions based on what's right or wrong, but on what's most politically expedient, on what will preserve his power. He's wicked, and yet he's also weak. He fears the consequences.

But then Herod throws a birthday party, and in his gospel Mark tells us that the guests were Herod's military commanders, and the leading men of the region. The kind of people Herod needs to keep on top of. And as part of the banquet Matthew tells us, v6, 'the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod.' So here is a room full of men, soldiers and politicians, who have no doubt been drinking, and Herod allows his step-daughter, who Josephus, the Jewish historian of the time, tells us was about 14, dance before them. It's not difficult to imagine why her dance might have pleased him, is it? That this was some kind of sexualised performance. And we've seen enough in the press over the last few weeks to know, and maybe some of you have even experienced it in the work-place, that there can be an abuse of sex by the powerful. That sex can become a bribe demanded by the powerful.

And Herod overplays his hand, v7, 'He promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.' In fact, Mark tells us that he offered her up to half of his

kingdom. Now does that remind you of anyone? Do you remember back in Esther how King Xerxes, ruler of the vast Persian empire, made the same promise? The probem is, Herod the tetrarch is no Xerxes, is he? He puts on the grandiose airs of an emperor, but in reality he's a small time ruler of a tiny fraction of Xerxes previous empire. He offers half his kingdom, but he doesn't even have a kingdom to offer. In reality, he is just a puppet ruler for Rome. But once again, he's an example of how power corrupts, and corrupts your view of reality, and who you really are.
And Herod is trapped, because his step-daughter goes to his wife, asks what she should ask for and comes back with the answer – the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Verse 9, 'And the king was sorry.' But not so sorry as to do the right thing. Just sorry because he's caught: because does he lose what little respect the people outside had for him, and kill the man they knew to be a prophet? Or, does he lose the respect of his peers before whom he's just made this foolish promise? And Herod is too embarrassed to do what's right. And once again he acts is if the law did not apply to him: he executes John without trial and does so by beheading him, both of which were illegal. His father, Herod the Great, slaughtered the innocents at Bethlehem, now his son, Herod the Tetrarch, slaughters the innocent.

And Herod is a sobering picture of the danger and illusion of power, isn't he? He appears to be powerful and yet he lacks true inner power. He uses power for his own ends, to keep himself in power, and yet in doing so reveals his deep insecurity and his need of popularity; he seems to be the one with all the power, at the top of the tree, and yet his wife, or his guests, are pulling his strings. He considers himself above the law, not realising that one day that law will be his downfall. It is, as one writer puts it, the pretension of power.

But having set Herod before us, Matthew goes on to show us a very different king.

Compassionate Power
You see, if Herod in some way represents all that is wrong with the world when it comes to power, Jesus is the great alternative. Because he too has power. He too is surrounded by people who want a share of that power. And yet, how he uses kingly power is so different.

Verse 13, 'Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.' Why a desolate place? Why by himself? He's just been told of his friend's, his cousin's murder – and maybe he feels desolate, maybe he feels that deep loss of grief that you've probably felt when you've lost a loved one. And yet it's probably more than that. You see, John's death is a foretaste of what will happen to Jesus, and Jesus knows that, even if others don't. And he knows that he has now got Herod's, and other's, unwanted attention. And he knows what's coming his way. He knows that one day he will kneel in a garden,

not a desert, and pray, 'Father, take this cup from me.' So for now, he puts space between him and Herod.

And yet, his search for seclusion doesn't work out like that, does it? Verse 14, 'When he went ashore he saw a great crowd.' Jesus wants some downtime, he wants some alone time, he wants a spiritual retreat, and what does he get? A crowd of needy people who want him, who want a piece of him.

How would you respond if that was you? How do you respond when you want some peace and quiet and someone takes it from you? You've been at work all day, and people have been taking from you all day, and you finally get home and the kids, or your wife, or your husband, they start wanting a piece of you – whilst you just want to be alone? Or how do you react when you've finally carved out some time for you, some down time, some away time – and someone calls you up, or interrupts you, or puts some work on you? Or you've planned stuff for the weekend and the boss tells you – I need this by Monday. Do you get annoyed? Maybe a bit irritated?

Verse 14, 'he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.' In the midst of his own loss, his own grief, with the shadow of death hanging over him, Jesus reaches out to them – and not in resentment, but in overflowing compassion. And he uses his power, not to protect or preserve himself, not to insulate himself from others troubles, not to harm others, but to heal them.

And clearly, when you were with Jesus, time flew by, and it starts getting late, and the disciples come to Jesus and tell him he needs to send the crowd away so they can buy food – and maybe they're beginning to feel like it's dinner time too! But Jesus has never been in the business of sending people away hungry, has he? That's just not what Jesus does.

Verse 16, 'But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." What? There are 5000 men here, Jesus, plus their wives and kids – Jesus we have a crowd of 10,000 *at least* in front of us, we can't possibly feed them! 'You give them something to eat!' Are you kidding?! We've only got 5 loaves and two fish!

And in one impossible sentence, 'you give them something to eat', Jesus brings home to them, and to us, our total inability, and yet our responsibility, to meet the hunger of the world around us – our total lack of power to do anything of significance to help or save others, or ourselves, and yet the need of someone to do it.

So if the crowd are not to go elsewhere to be fed, and if the disciples can't do it, who can? Verse 18, 'And he said, "Bring them here to me."' Bring your inability,

those loaves, those fish, bring your lack of power, bring your weakness to me, and see what I can do. And he has the crowd sit down, he takes the bread and the fish, and then Matthew says, v19, 'he looked up to heaven and said a blessing.' And apparently, the standard blessing when the head of a Jewish family broke bread was, 'Blessed art thou, o lord our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.' And Jesus takes what would have been a poor person's packed lunch and turns it into a feast for thousands. A feast way better than Herod's birthday banquet.

And unlike Herod, or anyone tempted by power today, Jesus doesn't feed off the crowd, he feeds them. And what the disciples, or you and I, have no power to do, he does. And their lack and inability becomes his opportunity to display his power and his ability. And he does it because he cares, because he loves, because he feels compassion for the mass of hungry, broken humanity. And he uses the disciples to distribute the food. They can't do it, and yet he uses them as he does it. It's what the apostle Paul will say later, that it's when we are weak that he is strong, it's when we know that we can't, that he says, but I can – because his strength, his power, is made perfect in our weakness.

And the scale of Jesus' provision is epic, isn't it? 5000 plus, probably in reality 10,000 or more, and verse 20, 'They all ate and were satisfied' – they were stuffed, they were full, and the disciples go round clearing up after and fill 12 baskets with the leftovers. What a picture of the fullness of life, that sense of inner wellbeing, of satisfaction, that we're all hungry for, but that only Jesus can provide.

And yet, there's something more here. You see, in Jewish thinking of the day, there was an expectation that when the Messiah came, he would repeat the miracle of God providing manna in the wilderness for Israel. And here is Jesus – in a desolate place, in a wilderness, providing bread for thousands. It's no wonder that when John recounts this event in his gospel he tells us that some in the crowd wanted to make Jesus king by force. They recognise who he is - a king who uses his power to feed and heal his people, not consume them or kill them.

But as Jesus sets this feast before the people Matthew is preparing us for something more. That Jesus isn't just the king who breaks bread for his people. He's the king who will be broken for his people.

Transformative Power

Now John the Baptist was Jesus' forerunner. He prepared people for his coming. But what happens to John at the hands of Herod also prepares us for what will happen to Jesus at the hands of the religious leaders and Pilate and Herod.

And here Herod has John beheaded because he doesn't want to lose face before his dinner guests, and soon Pilate will hand Jesus over to be crucified because he

doesn't want to lose face before the crowd. Here Herod is too embarrassed, to worried about his own appearance, to do the right thing. And Pilate will be too fearful. But as Jesus stood before him, Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews? Don't you know I have the authority – the power - to release you or crucify you?' And Jesus replied – you would have no such power if it had not been given you from above.

And that's the power Jesus gave up – he left his place of ultimate power, to come under the power of men like Herod and Pilate. And at the cross, when he seemed at his weakest, at his most unable, at the mercy of everyone else's power, that was when he was exerting his power, and giving himself as bread to be broken, to save us who have no power, to pay the price for all the times we've misused power, to satisfy the hunger of our empty hearts and transform us.

You see, this king loves you, he's for you, and through his work on the cross he accepts you. And now, as Paul says, the power that's at work in you as you put your trust in him, is the same power that raised him from the dead. It's Jesus' power of life, not Herod or sin's power of death. And knowing that transforms the way you handle power and the powerful. It means you don't need to suck up to the powerful trying to ingratiate yourself to them, because you know in whose powerful hands your life, and their life, really lies. So it gives you the deep inner security that Herod lacked, but John had, to speak truth to power. But it will also mean you don't denigrate power. You don't give the powerful, your boss, or our political leaders, too much respect, but neither do you give them too little – because you know that what power they have has been given them by God for others good.

But it also changes the way you use power, or your lack of it. It stops you being corrupted by power, because you know that you don't need ever more power to feel secure – you know you're secure in him. You know you don't need the approval of the crowd, or a group of so-called friends, so you can use what social capital you have for good and for justice, and not just to stay in other's good books. And you know that the one who had ultimate power didn't use it to protect himself, or feather his own nest, or preserve his position, but to give of himself for others, so you can do the same.

Or maybe you see the needs of the world and think, 'what can I do? I have no power.' And Jesus says, 'yes but I do; and I love you, I accept you, so come to me, bring to me your lack and I will use you – because I'm the one with the compassion and the power to meet these needs.'