

An Icon, A Prince, A King
Mark 6:14-29 6 Pentecost B: July 12, 2009
Buck Mountain Episcopal Church
The Rev. Connie Clark

I have a guessing game for you this morning. I'm going to read some words and phrases and I wonder if you'll know who these words and phrases are referring to. Here we go:

An icon. A prince, a king. Brightest star you've ever seen.
Transformative. Brilliant. A genius. Unsurpassed.
A part of our lives. An *essential* part of the lives of millions of people.

Can you guess? Have you been exposed to any electronic media in the past two weeks? If you have, you might have known who these words described: Michael Jackson. Michael Jackson, a gifted singer and dancer, who died relatively young after a troubled life. Michael Jackson, who is said to have had a serious problem with prescription drugs, and who was forced to spend millions of dollars to fight off repeated child molestation charges. Michael Jackson, who started out handsome and used plastic surgery to turn himself into a frightening caricature of – something, I don't know what.

When he died, it seemed a lot of people couldn't say enough about how important he was, how he influenced American culture, how he did wonderful things for people, and so on and so on. With death, his stock shot way up. That's hagiography for you – the making of saints. It happens a lot when people die. I shouldn't have been surprised.

But what really caught my attention about Michael's death was the same thing that I was struck with when Princess Diana and other celebrities died: People have a need to elevate celebrities beyond human stature to idol stature. People have a need to worship something. In our contemporary world, an awful lot of people haven't been taught a religious tradition, nor have they been taught to think critically about much of anything. Therefore, they wind up choosing to worship Michael Jackson or Princess Diana or Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie or ... well, you get the idea.

The language used to describe Michael Jackson since his death is probably similar to the language used to describe King Herod by members of his court and by the people whom he ruled. In many cultures, including the culture of Jesus' time and place, government authorities and certainly kings and queens were thought of as divine – or at the very least, divinely favored. Just like Michael Jackson, Herod was doubtless flattered, toadied to, catered to, and shielded from the truth of what he was becoming by the people who surrounded him. What is reality for a king or a pop star? It is carefully engineered and controlled so that the idol's comfort is maintained at all costs. What are the consequences when a king or a pop star does something evil? Most of the time, there aren't any.

Herod had some issues – we can see that clearly from the story Mark tells us. He had taken his brother’s wife as his own wife. This doesn’t mean he married her. It means he saw something he liked, and used his power as king to get it – and I use the term “it” advisedly, because when you lust after a person, that person can quickly become nothing more than an object of your desire. Herod got “it,” her, and presumably enjoyed the fruits of his conquest.

Then we have this extreme weirdness with Herodias, a young girl – maybe very young, we don’t know for sure. And she dances for her father and his guests. Folks, this was surely not a lovely little ballet-class recital we’re talking about here. This was more like the dance of the seven veils. It was a sexual dance, a lascivious dance. And Herodias’ father – the man who should have been protecting her innocence – is so overwhelmed at the young girl’s dance that he rewards her lavishly.

So warped is his perspective that Herod offers the girl up to half his kingdom as a reward for her inappropriate dance. Like a good girl, she goes to her mom and says, in effect, “How do we best take advantage of this situation? How do we play this one-of-a-kind opportunity?”

The answer makes Herod stop and think for a minute. He seems to have had a soft spot for John the Baptist, even though he didn’t understand what John was saying. How could he understand John’s message? John preached returning to God, renouncing sin, getting right with the Lord – which always means admitting you are just another human being, that God is God and you are just plain old you, and that God is in charge and **should be** in charge. John preached about a Messiah – a King of all Kings – who was soon to come and who would eclipse even the power of the Roman Emperor, Herod’s big boss.

When I envision Herod listening to John’s preaching, I envision a dog looking quizzically at me when I make funny noises: head turned, ears cocked, brow furrowed. It’s almost like John was preaching a different language – that’s how far removed John’s value system was from Herod’s. John’s gone to the desert to follow his prophetic call. He’s fasting all the time, he wears weird scratchy clothes, he abstains from most of life’s pleasures. Why? It wasn’t to prove some political point. John’s whole life was about pointing to Jesus and the Kingdom of God, which was, as he said, coming, and coming soon.

Contrast John and his desert diet of honey and bugs with Herod and his sumptuous banquet and his dirty-dancing daughter. Contrast John and his fierce faithfulness to God’s call – his utter integrity – with Herod’s foolish promise to a child that will bring a good man to execution. Herod doesn’t want to kill John, but he doesn’t want to lose face, either. When your desire to look tough to your sycophantic admirers outweighs your conscience to the point of murder, your conscience ain’t much. Herod’s pitifully weak conscience is all that’s left after years of being told he’s special, he’s powerful, he can have whatever he wants, he **should** have whatever he wants because he

was a prince and now a king – granted, king of a kind of fourth-rate colony in a far outpost of the Empire, but a king nonetheless.

Herod was steeped in the P.R. messages of his royal family from birth. It's really to his credit that he would have listened to John at all, or had a twinge of guilt at the thought of beheading him. But that's not a lot of credit when you consider the outright evil of his crime against John.

I can't continue drawing a parallel with Michael Jackson because I don't know enough about Mr. Jackson. Some of the similarities are very clear – the whole business of being protected from reality and protected from the consequences of one's actions, the belief in oneself as special and powerful and outside the regular rules of humanity.

But I *can* draw a parallel between our culture and the culture of Herod's time. My beloved father, who left school in the ninth grade but who was incredibly well-read, sometimes used words he didn't know how to pronounce correctly. One of those words was "de-ca-dent." He used it a lot, comparing our time to the time of Jesus and the excesses of the Roman Empire. I like "de-ca-dent" because it focuses our attention on the root of the word – on *decay*. There was then, and there is now, flagrant moral and ethical decay all around us. There was then, and there is now, a sense of lost moorings, of self-directed frenzy, of greed, ego, and sexuality run amok.

Into that situation 2,000 years ago came John the Baptist, Jesus's first cousin, sent by God not to scold people but to bring them to their senses, to make them aware of how far they had strayed from the path God created for them, and to invite them to a new life. The scholar Marcus Borg says that John's message was dual: a message of indictment and invitation.

Then, after John met his fate because he spoke truth to power, Jesus emerged to preach the Gospel to those same people who were living distorted lives – who were lost and needed to be found. Those people were like sheep without a shepherd, helpless. They didn't even know it until they saw and heard Jesus – and then they understand what they had been missing. When they saw Jesus, they "got it" that they were hungry for God, and that they had been trying to fill the holes in their souls with all kinds of things that had nothing to do with God. When they saw Jesus, they saw somebody who could deal with that hunger by loving them, teaching them, and healing them.

It is the same for us.

Please don't think I'm pointing to any one person here or to our congregation as a whole as being especially sinful or especially distracted or seduced by the many siren songs of contemporary culture. Not that my opinion really matters that much, but I actually think we are doing pretty well on a spiritual health scale! But we are doing well for one simple reason: Because we have turned to God as revealed to us in Christ. You make that turn, you make that commitment, and God's grace makes it possible for you to resist the things of this world that are so sparkly and so tempting – and so devastatingly

empty. You make that commitment, you get to know Jesus even a little bit, and you know you'd never use worshipful words to describe a Michael Jackson or a Princess Diana or any celebrity ever again ... because while they might be nice people or talented people or even very generous or good people, they are definitely NOT Jesus. Once you've met Jesus, the distinction is clear: He's the one to follow, and he's the one to worship. No substitutes will do. Even when following him and proclaiming him might cost you your life – it's worth it. It's more than worth it.

From over a century ago, the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson still ring to: “Be careful what you worship, for what you worship you will become. What you praise, you will grow into.” You and I aren't worshipping Michael Jackson, not even close, but the idolatry we've seen since his death holds some warnings for us. First, we need to examine our own hearts and minds – continually – to see if we're putting anything in the place where only God should be. Second, we must remember that we are called, like John the Baptist, to proclaim Jesus and to call people away from idolatry into a life of love, worship, fellowship and service. We are to be that strange thing, neither fish nor fowl, that Jesus described as “in the world but not of the world.” We are to shine a light on the holy alternatives to the world's distortions, not just here when we're worshipping but in our daily lives. Because even if we **do** know the saving difference between Michael Jackson and Jesus, a whole lot of people don't – and God loves them too and yearns for them to come him, and to a whole lot better life than *People* magazine and MTV and “Entertainment Tonight” can begin to offer. When they come to God, they come to us, their brothers and sisters, as well. It is our holy call to seek them out in God's name and to welcome them home. AMEN.