

Much of this Gospel account (Mark 6: 14 – 29) has all the characteristics of a popular story told over and over again in the villages and bazaars of the first century Jewish homeland, and it probably became more embellished with each telling. It is not entirely accurate historically. The real or most important reason why Herod Antipas imprisoned and executed John the Baptist was because John had become a threat to his power. He feared that John, who was popular among the people, would lead a messianic insurrection against his rule. But Mark wants to give us a story in the style of a couple of well-known ancient accounts of executions at banquets, one of which is in the Bible, in the book of Esther.

It is strange that Mark, who is noted for his brevity, uses up so much space to include this story. But like the passion and death of Jesus that it foreshadows, it is reminding us of the cost of true discipleship, the cost of speaking in God's name, especially against people of power. Sometimes, reading the Bible can be challenging when we are confronted with stories of violence, much of it done apparently in the name of God. To deal with this difficult issue, John Dominic Crossan, one of the world's leading biblical scholars today, wrote an excellent book with the provocative title, 'How to read the Bible and still be a Christian' (subtitled: 'Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis through Revelation')

When we do meet violence in the scriptures, divine or human, or stories that reflect the ancient belief that much human violence was the will of the divine, we are surely being, as it were, anaesthetised against violence, and led to see that this kind of settling of differences among people, which has been almost normal in history, is never, in fact, the will of God, the God that we have come to know especially through the person of Jesus. As the Franciscan Richard Rohr puts it: 'It is not God who is violent. We are. It is not that God demands suffering of humans. We do. God does not want or need suffering – neither in Jesus nor in us.'

John the Baptist and Jesus appeared in a violent world, a corrupt and unjust world. They were God's instruments in trying to change that world, to raise it up to where God had always intended it to be. This is where the vision of Paul in the letter to the Ephesians is so liberating and encouraging. We read that Jesus the Christ, in his crucifixion and resurrection 'gathered up all things in himself, things in heaven and things on earth.' Jesus revealed the Divine Mind

by carrying in his own person the mystery of suffering, identifying completely with the human predicament, and standing in full solidarity with it from beginning to end. The outcome was change, resurrection for him but with the intention that it will be also for us. That would first mean freeing us from the endless cycle of being trapped inside of pain and projecting that pain on to others.

For resurrection is not simply or solely about a future beyond this life, although we must recognize with sorrow that this was the only kind of resurrection, the only promised land, that many suffering people in history could ever look forward to. But for most of us today, resurrection is about *our today*, our present, our life in Christ now, which, although finding its fullness beyond this life and world, nevertheless, invites us, urges us, and enables us, to walk in its light here and now. That is what our baptism signified – that we died to an old way of living, overcoming what the mystics call the false self, and we rose to a new life, where we learn to discover the true self, which as Paul tells us elsewhere ‘is hidden with Christ in God.’

The resurrection life equals true humanity, true freedom, life that is real and whole. The real you, the real me, is not about nationality, ethnicity, skin colour, culture, gender, sexual orientation, social class, wealth, or status given by birth, profession, or celebrity. These are temporary costumes that form the false or incomplete self, and some of them are also the cause of hate, prejudice, conflict and violence. By becoming Christian, we have chosen, or should have chosen, to transcend these worldly forms even while having to live with them to some extent. Such identities and characteristics are certainly part of what it means to be human, as long as they do not dominate or define us or brainwash us into thinking they have anything to do with who and what we really are.

Resurrection life, true life, is about being able to accept, to embrace the unconditional love of God for ourselves and for everyone else, and to be ourselves the visible compassion of God to others without distinction. When by the grace of God, we can rise to this sacred state of being and seeing, we find our true humanity, our true identity as children of God; we are risen from the dead, or in the words of our second reading, we have obtained a share in our inheritance, we have grasped the gospel of our salvation.

