

Introduction

The report about the death of John the Baptist that we have in our text for today (Mat 14.1-21) has some difficult, if not troubling, aspects to it. Here is a servant of God of the highest rank (no OT prophet is greater) who dies in prison alone at the hands of a petty Roman ruler. We may wonder about the providence of God as we watch the events that lead to his decapitation and the mistreatment of his body. We see him in prison because of his bold preaching, but he dies because of the impulsiveness of the foolish ruler and the malice of a sinful woman. The greatest man born of women dies at the request of a malicious woman:

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, ² and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." ³ For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, ⁴ because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." ⁵ And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. ⁶ But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, ⁷ so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." ⁹ And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given (Mat 14.1-9).

Furthermore, we may wonder about our Lord's response to John's death because He says nothing and goes about His business as usual; at least that is the impression the narrator gives us: **He [Herod] sent and had John beheaded in the prison, ¹¹ and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. ¹² And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus. ¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. ¹⁵ Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.**

We have some work to do to understand the narrator's purpose in this account. Over all, he reminds us of John the Baptist. However, the way that he introduces the death of John into the narrative indicates that the death of John is not the theme of Matthew 14.

Actually, we are at a transition in the book and the theme here is "The Spreading Fame of Jesus" (v. 1). A closer look at the opening phrase (at that time) will make the theme clear and suggest how we can outline it.

"At that time" is an indefinite time indicator. In this context, it means that at some point in the ministry of Christ, *after* the death of John, the fame of Jesus spread so far that it even reached the palace of Herod. It came about around the pivotal event of the death of John, and it came about through the miracle-working ministry of Christ that contrasts with the miracle working He did in His hometown. Some things that Matthew brings up in the succeeding narrative (14-15) that explain how the news of Jesus spread to Herod's court are the feeding of 5,000, walking on water, healing all in that region, healing a demon-oppressed daughter of a Canaanite woman, healing great crowds, and feeding the 4,000). This kind of activity led to Herod's awareness of Jesus and his confusion of Jesus with John.

The opening phrase is obviously not a chronological indicator because the account is in effect a flashback. At some imprecise point in time, news of the fame of Jesus reached the palace. This news awakened the troubled conscience of Herod regarding his treatment of John in such a way that he confused Jesus with John. The narrator takes this fact as a cue to recount the

death of John, the reaction of Jesus, and the subsequent activities of Christ that led to the spreading fame of Jesus. Upon John's imprisonment, the fame of Jesus spread widely throughout the land. Now, upon his death, the fame of Jesus spread even farther gaining the attention of the Roman governor in the land of Israel.

Therefore, in a rough and ready way, there are two things to consider regarding the spreading fame of Jesus: 1) we must see it in light of the pivotal event of John's death, and 2) we must see it in light of His miracle-working ministry.

1A. The Pivotal Event Regarding John (His death)

In using this flashback device, Matthew draws our attention to the relationship between John and Jesus by reciting the confusion of Herod who said, when he heard about the fame of Jesus, **This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him** (14.1).

There is an amazing contrast here between Herod and John. The Roman ruler is weak and cowardly before those of lower rank. He is foolish and unprincipled. John stands tall in strength and courage before those of higher rank. He is wise and principled. Still, the weak, foolish, and sinful man has the upper hand and thus with stupidity and impulsiveness, he allows John to be made into a sadistic joke in which they sever his head from his body and put it on a platter as if to be the main delight at dinner. John is the greatest OT prophet and he suffers the fate of all the prophets at the hands of sinners. What must be ahead for our Lord in the hands of His people and the officials of Rome? This is a foreboding, subtle but forceful because of the relationship of John to Jesus.

We have to view John's death as part of the unfolding purpose of God in the history of redemption. John is the forerunner of the Messiah. He comes first announcing the coming of the kingdom. He proclaims the coming of the one who is "Greater than I." Furthermore, John says, "He must increase and I must decrease" (Jn 3.30). John cut the ground ahead of Jesus by calling out a new Israel from old Israel. The sign of entry into the new covenant community was baptism with water for repentance (Mat 3.11). He showed us how people enter the kingdom promised in the OT; they enter by baptism confessing their sins (Mat 3.6). Understandably, John has difficulty with the idea of baptizing Jesus for he wonders how the Messiah can receive repentance baptism. However, Jesus insisted and John baptized Him (Mat 3.13-17). For a short time, there was an overlap between the ministries of John and Jesus and John's outreach began to shrink while the outreach of Jesus grew so that "Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John" (Jn 4.1). Then, when Herod imprisoned John, Jesus began His ministry of preaching the gospel of the kingdom in an accelerated way by word and deed. With John's arrest (Mat 4.12) came Jesus' fame in Syria, Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan (Mat 4.17-25). When John is in prison, Jesus gives more insights about the coming of the kingdom (Mat 11.1-19). After John dies, the fame of Jesus spreads even farther even reaching the court of the king (Mat 14.1-2). This is another way of saying "if you know who John is then you know who Jesus is and you know that the long awaited kingdom has come."

Furthermore, there is another subtle dimension to the story. The narrator had just reported Jesus' words to the hometown crowd, "**A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household**" (13.57). What happened to John will also happen to Jesus; He too will suffer a shameful death in the context of political pressures. Thus, despite the spreading fame, that is not the important point in the story of Jesus. He is the prophet and He will experience the greatest conceivable dishonor in order to bring sinful people into the coming kingdom. Thus, something else is at work in this narrative that focuses on the spreading fame of Jesus against the backdrop of the death of John as a pivotal event in the history of redemption (cf. the history of redemption and the record of it in Matthew can be earmarked by this relationship and event). That something else is the miracles that drive the fame and ultimately in the miracles that something else is the gospel of the kingdom. To that aspect of this theme we now turn.

2A. The Miracle-Working Ministry of Jesus

The miracles that contribute to the fame of Jesus include many more than the feeding of the five thousand, but that is as far as we will go in our discussion today (to 14.21).

This section continues the narrative beginning with the report of the death of John to Jesus, **When Jesus heard this, he withdrew ...** (14.13). Two things are evident about our Lord in this section: His silent submission and His active compassion.

1B. Silent submission of Christ

When Jesus heard of John's death, what does Matthew tell us He did? Matthew simply says, **Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself** (14.13). There is no miraculous saving of John. Jesus is alone with the Father in a solitary place.

There is no complaining. There is no evidence of mourning. John's ministry had the earmarks of mourning in light of His proclamation of judgment. Jesus, however, proclaims the presence of the kingdom in a way unexpected by John. The kingdom comes and judgment does not fall immediately on the nations. Instead of judgment, the nations have the gospel that arises from the quiet submission of Christ. Thus, Jesus hears of John's death, He retreats to the presence and fellowship of the Father in heaven, and then He takes up His work with renewed vigor.

2B. Active compassion of Christ

The work Jesus does in fulfilling His mission involves three basic things here in this context. First, He healed the sick, **When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick** (14.14). Second, He took five loaves and two fish, blessed it, broke the bread and through the disciples fed five thousand men, besides women and children (14.21). Third, the way Jesus fed the crowd, His blessing the bread and breaking it, and the precise account of twelve baskets left over work together to give us the promise of the life-giving gospel that Jesus will give through His apostles to sinners in need, to sinners in a famine for righteousness.

Implications

1) Fame

Jesus became a famous person in His own lifetime and more significantly in human history in every generation since His resurrection. Interestingly, how did His fame spread so far and wide? It is not by seeking it *per se*. His fame comes by seeking it in as humble a way as possible in His ministry on earth (cf. Mat 12.19). He receives the honor and glory of the Father by quiet submission and active compassion in fulfilling the will of God according to the Scriptures. For what does He do when His forerunner dies, when the one who paved the way for His kingly glory dies as a cruel joke amidst the laughter of fools?

He quietly submits to the Father's will. He retreats to a place of solitude to meditate on the Scriptures and pray. We know this from what He typically did when He retreated to be by Himself (cf. 14.23, **"to pray"**). He does no miracle to deliver John from prison (cf. the deliverance of the apostles from prison, Acts 5 and Peter's deliverance from prison in Acts 12, both by an angel sent by the Lord Jesus, 5.19; 12.7). When they put John in prison, Jesus expanded His labors in the gospel; when John was about to die, Jesus was doing miracles; when John died, Jesus did even more miracles so that His fame reached the ears of the Gentile rulers. There is no miracle for John.

Jesus gave John the highest honors calling him the greatest prophet ever born, and when the whimsical and stupid king dishonors him in an outrageous way, Jesus does nothing to spare him. How can this be? It is the way of the prophets among sinners. It is the way for John and it will be the way for John's king as well. However, the Father has so appointed it. Jesus knows that the death of His saints is precious in eyes of God. Moreover, this is an example of the sovereignty of God in the outworking of His purposes and in the history of redemption. Accordingly, in terms of His mission as the Son of Man, as the redeemer of God's elect people, Jesus quietly submits to the Father's will and actively shows compassion on sinners in need. That

is how Jesus became famous, by quite submission and active compassion in anticipation of the dishonor He knew He would receive in His home country (coming to His own, they receive Him not, Jn 1.11).

2) Kingdom glory

Of course, He does pray for the glory He once had with the Father before the foundation of the world (Jn 17.5, **And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed**). He prays as the obedient servant of the Lord and He waits for the Father's appointed time. Therefore, to complete His work on earth He submits to the sovereign purposes of God in the death of John and He reveals the gospel in a marvelously pregnant way by feeding the five thousand.

What does this tell us about the fame of the Lord Jesus? How will He receive the glory of the Father? It tells us that His glory comes through laying the foundation of the church by training the apostles to give the bread *from His hands* to sinners and in that way to form the new covenant people. He does this in keeping with what John began to do. John opened the door to the new Israel and Jesus marched through that door. It was John's glory to die in dishonor as the forerunner of the king. It was our Lord's glory to die in dishonor as the king of righteousness, peace, and glory! By feeding the five thousand, Jesus lays the foundation for the church and promises us life-giving nourishment. He blesses the bread, gives it to the disciples who in turn give it to the crowds to eat all they need until they are satisfied.

3) The feast of glory

The account is forward looking. One prophet dies in dishonor and another will soon die in greater dishonor. The one is the forerunner of the great king; the other is the great king. The first is beheaded in prison; the other dies on the cross. Why do these things so unfold in the history of redemption? They unfold this way according to the sovereign purposes of God to bring the crowds, the nations, together in a blessed communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the feast of joy and rejoicing in the acceptance of sinners in the glory of heaven. Remarkably, we taste of that coming feast even now, as we feast on the gospel of the NT Scriptures. We taste of that feast even now when we partake together at the Lord's Table. Thus, our text on the spreading fame of Jesus that comes through obedience and love is another way that He reassures us of our glory, and it has the additional promise that we have heard Him say before, **Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** ⁴ **"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.** ⁵ **"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.** ⁶ **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied (Mat 5.3-6).**

In light of these things, let us fall down before the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ and let us honor Him as our Sabbath king. To Him belongs all fame, glory, and honor both now and forevermore, Amen.