

Isn't it difficult to stick to your guns when you know you'll be criticized? Have you been so self-absorbed you didn't realize your need resulted in a devastating pain to someone else? We don't have guillotines but still worry about repercussions from actions others might not understand or like. John the Baptist knew he might face recrimination but spoke as God led him to speak. Herod was so selfish he had no consideration of the effect on others. Neither worried about the consequences of their words, yet each would feel the earthly pain their words brought about.

How often have you done the right thing but wound up with results different than expected? One might observe every traffic law yet still be in an accident caused by someone else. We have all caused pain to others without that being our intention or even realizing how it happened. One might preach against abortion, but if not with sensitivity to someone who has made that choice, might wind up driving them away from rather than into the healing love of Christ.

Words always have consequences. John did what God inspired him to do. The earthly reward for his efforts were prison and death. It wasn't fair, but doing the right thing caused him to lose his life. Throughout history people like Dr. Martin Luther King or Dietrich Bonhoeffer found the same result from being faithful. King Herod's selfish and casual remark meant to ingratiate himself with a lovely stepdaughter enabled his angry wife to have John's head on a platter. The reward of a prophet is not always earthly.

John was faithful to his calling. He easily could have said, *"This is not what I signed up for! This is not what I deserve. Why live the life of faith if such trouble comes my way?"* Any reasonable person would ask the same questions. It is increasingly difficult in an angry and selfish world to follow Jesus. Many live as if the earth and universe revolve around us. Are decisions sometimes based solely on my benefit without concern for the effect on others? People follow laws if they are convenient. We have faith, but can be embarrassed to admit what we believe. When others ask for advice we sometimes hide the truth for fear of someone not liking what they hear. Too often words and actions have more to do with my needs rather than listening for God's guidance. Discipleship and servant love are not always our primary motive for decisions.

Jesus' message was fairly consistent. *God is creator and owner of all that is. Live in a way that gives glory to the beauty of God's creation. Live to serve others with forgiveness and servant love rather than expecting everyone to give you what you want and deserve.* Such words are not a popular refrain today, but are the essence of what faith in God is all about. Too often we act as kings and queens and want to be treated like rock stars rather than prophets of faith. The brokenness of sin tempts us assume God is our servant and puppet. We make demands as if God owes us for our willingness to believe. To others we say "give me what I want and expect, and then we will talk about you."

On the other hand, faith means we cling to God even if we might face ridicule or even worse. John is certainly an extreme example but there are few who so willingly accepted a role that would cost such sacrifice. John's message is not any easier to hear today. For me to admit the need to repent also requires admitting that in some way I had acted as if my desires were more important than God's love.

Our problem today is not that others refuse to allow us to be disciples, but too often we are afraid to be one. Our voice rather than God's is often the sound of our living. Like Herod we too quickly act without considering the consequences our desires might have on someone we care about. Too often we look for acceptance rather than an opportunity to wash someone's feet. Faith is for all times not just convenient ones.

We likely won't be killed for following Jesus (even though in some countries it still happens quite often.) But following Christ might have consequences and earthly losses. Many will think us foolish and naïve if faith causes us to follow a path that might be unpopular with the crowd. Faithfulness is often its only reward.

John lost his life for being faithful. That was certainly not fair, but he did what needed to be done. In the gift of taking on human flesh as a baby God showed the extreme nature of love. His willingness to embrace sinners and welcome those rejected by the elite power brokers Jesus showed the face of true servant love. Accepting our death he experienced darkness he didn't deserve. In such a loving surrender, He showed our future by changing the tomb into a doorway to an eternal paradise of bright love.

In one of his books, Eugene Peterson laments that "*North American religion is basically a consumer religion. Americans see God as a product that will help them to live well or to live better. Having seen that, they do what consumers do, shop for the best deal.*"¹ In other words, many believe if we have faith, God should give us what we want. And many think faith should protect us from anything undeserved or unexpected. In reality, God has given us what we need, and is with us no matter what the brokenness of a rebellious creation throws our way. Sometimes we get what we deserve and sometimes not. Sometimes evil people prosper and good people suffer, but in the end, people of faith are never alone, even in prison, and even when heads might roll.

Herod might have cut off John's head, but he couldn't silence his voice, as the Words were the breath of God himself. The miracle of Easter became a new creation when Jesus said "*It is finished, it is good, now I can rest!*" That doesn't mean God went to sleep but that He has given every earthly gift imaginable, and now we are free to be lifted up on angel wings, no matter how good or how difficult, how undeserved or how blessed, each and every day becomes.

Daily each must ask if my words and actions revolve around the freeing love of God or

1 Under the Unpredictable Plant. Eugene Peterson. Eerdmans. 1992, page 35

my own selfishness and short sightedness. Rather than worrying that heads might roll, we would do better to rejoice that a stone in front of the tomb was rolled away! When that is our beginning faith will empower God's life to shine in mine. - tws