

Those reared in the Christian faith, especially those who attended Sunday School as children, know the story of John the Baptist's death. Rarely do we hear it preached. In the old Book of Common Prayer lectionary of the Episcopal Church, the lectionary compilers studiously avoided the story; it just wasn't something nice to talk about. Vindictiveness, spite, narcissistic rage – all of these attributes are applicable to Herodias, wife of King Herod, a wife taken in violation of Jewish law. We also see other attributes that fail to rise to any level of admiration – a king who would murder even someone he respected, because he wanted to avoid the embarrassment of going back on his word, a word hastily and inconsiderately given in the heat of a drunken moment, a promise uttered without thinking.

What value is the story? If nothing more, it reminds us that there is a cost associated with insisting on righteousness and justice, particularly when you stand up against corrupt, yet powerful authority. As I re-read this story of John the Baptist, my mind went to the plight of the dissidents in Iran, who courageously protest a corrupt election, particularly when I remembered that Iran still chops off heads. But more appropriately, my thoughts go to the remembrance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Evangelical pastor and one of Protestantism's greatest scholars, who courageously spoke against a murderous Nazi government, knowing even as he did so that speaking the truth was bound to cost him his life. Bonhoeffer stood in the tradition and courage of John the Baptist and our Lord Jesus Christ, who would not let the threat and sting of death keep them from proclaiming the word of God. One of Bonhoeffer's books was entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*, a book that reminds us that to be disciples is to speak God's truth in a hostile world, and that we must be willing to pay the cost of standing up to evil, in whatever form we see it, or we are not fit to claim to be disciples of the Son of the Living God. Bonhoeffer said that to seek to avoid the cost, to be afraid to pay the price of speaking God's truth in this world is to seek cheap grace, and grace, while freely given can never be cheap, because Jesus Christ paid for it with his life.

We have to ask ourselves what is of ultimate value. What really matters? Do we gain anything by being silent when truth needs speaking, when sin must be labeled for what it is? Do we dare stay silent in the hope that someone else will have more courage and pay the price that we seek to avoid? There is a cost to discipleship. There is a price tag on Christianity. There is a perpetual obligation that attaches to those baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that obligation is to set self aside if self becomes an obstacle to proclaiming Christ Jesus in this world. John gave his life to prepare the way of the One who would give his life for the redemption of this world, who would die for our salvation. He reminds us that courage in proclaiming God's word is an expectation and treasure for disciples of Jesus Christ. *Amen.*