

**The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 10  
Holy Comforter Episcopal Church  
The Rev. John E. Shields  
July 12, 2009**

**The gospel today is about as gruesome as you can get. It concerns Herod's reaction to news that he is getting about Jesus and the miraculous healings that have taken place. When Herod hears about Jesus, he thinks that John the Baptist has come back from the dead. You see Herod had John arrested and put in prison. He then had him executed.**

**You just heard the story. John TB had pointed out to Herod -- (by the way there were a number of Herods, this one is Herod Antipas – one of the sons of Herod the Great – that is the one who tried to kill all the children at the time of Jesus' birth.) These are not nice people – in any event John TB pointed out to Herod that it was immoral for him to have an affair and subsequently marry his step-brother's wife.**

**(You see, unlike today, rulers in those days thought that, because of their exalted status, the rules of fidelity and honesty in marriage did not apply to them. I am glad that we have progressed beyond that kind of behavior on the part of powerful people today.)**

**The wife in question this morning is named Herodias and she was very angry with John the Baptist. She uses her daughter's dancing, and the King's pleasure from watching her, to set up Herod into making a promise that he would execute John. And so it was that John was beheaded as you just heard in our gospel.**

**Certainly the writer of Mark's gospel is foreshadowing Jesus' crucifixion by telling this story.**

**I guess it is coming earlier today than it usually does – we are already there – Why are we telling this old story? – It is yucky and dated and tacky. Or put another way, “So What?”**

**Here is what --- Today we are going to bring four new persons into the body of Christ. We will use the ancient initiation rite known as Holy Baptism as we do this.**

**These children are being baptized as Christians who are then called to live in a very violent and complex world. As a community of faith, we are responsible for helping them remain faithful in the face of all that the world may throw at them.**

**The story is not as irrelevant as you might think, for instance, both Jesus and his cousin, John the Baptist are recipients of state sponsored killing - known euphemistically as capital punishment. The government executed both of them. We still do that in our state.**

**Be that as it may, my larger point is that the world into which our newly baptized are going to live is indeed violent and complex. It is difficult and often deceitful. It is often cruel and uncaring.**

**It is a world of paradox and challenge. It is a world where children are starving in one place while in another folks are concerned with childhood obesity caused by over indulgence and bad diets. A world, where in some places, entirely preventable diseases are eradicating millions, while in other places those illnesses are rarely seen due to the availability of clean water and mass inexpensive immunizations.**

**How will we help these children to understand that their worth as human beings has nothing to do with physical appearance or wealth or popularity? How will we help them understand that they are worthy because God loves them – how will they know that?**

**This is where you come in.**

**In this service we see that the action occurring is not just between an individual and God – but rather it is a coming together of family, the individual, the community – the church assembled. All are integral parts of what is going to occur.**

**This action actually flies in the face of much popular religion. It is in direct conflict with the notion of individual salvation as an extension of our notion of pious individualism -- That whole notion of “Me (sic) and God got a good thing going.”**

**That is the theology that leads to the rationalizations “I don’t need church, I can commune with God in nature.” or “I find God on the golf course.” That one may be true – you sure hear God’s name called out a lot on the course.**

**Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church, USA said at Tuesday’s opening Eucharist for the General Convention: “...the great Western heresy – (is) that we can be saved as individuals -- that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God... (this is) caricatured in some quarters by insisting that Salvation depends on reciting a specific verbal formula about Jesus.” (Sermon, July 7, 2009 – Anaheim, CA.)**

**In fact the theme of the General Convention is characterized by an African word – Ubuntu. To quote Jefferts Schori:**

**“(Ubuntu) doesn’t have any “I”s in it. The I only emerges as we connect – and that is really what the word means: I am because we are, and I can only become a whole person in relationship to with others. There is no “I” without “you” and in our context, you and I are known only as we reflect the image of the one who created us.”**

**This is yet an iteration of what I told you a few weeks back – we are in this boat together.**

**Today, we bring four new people into the body of Christ. They are getting into the boat with us.**

**Today we celebrate the fact that even when life is gruesome – they/we are never alone – they/we have the promise that God is always with us – that they/we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever. And finally, they/we have the community of faith – we have each other to lend a hand, a shoulder to cry on, to partner in prayer, to celebrate in Joy and to hold each other up when everything seems to be pointing down.**

**Today we promise to be there for them by word and example – if we do our job and keep our promises – someday they will promise to be there for us as well.**

**Amen**

