

Herod in this reading is gripped by the onslaught of a prophet; and the story has to end in violence and death - martyrdom. In our Lectionary during these summer months of year two, the Church sets before us the witness of the prophets. As we have listened to them, we have heard how the message from God comes to denounce, above all, the people who are most anxious to claim divine authority for themselves. It is worth noting that, in ancient times, the kings and emperors were quite happy to do this: so much so that even a Christian emperor like Constantine found it easy to appropriate for himself the title *isapostolos* -equal to the apostles - and to claim the right to call and sit in judgment over the general councils of the Church.

In our time the authority of the Church is vested in the bishops and in the Papacy. But it is perfectly possible for these to lose their way quite badly, and to be just as much in need of prophets and prophetic denunciation as any of their predecessors - Popes, Bishops, High priests or kings in Jerusalem. Anyone can see in the figures that govern our church at the present time a craven fear of the challenges of our times, a terror of taking real responsibility for others, a fear of the demands of pastoral care. They evade their responsibilities every day because they are afraid of making mistakes. They dress the Church up the resurrected plumage of past eras, as if to seek reassurance in what is old and, they assert, tried and tested. The Pope goes diligently through the old cupboards of the Vatican looking for more and more outrageous garments from the popes of the previous centuries. Seminarians dress up in lace and wear bands of satin round cassocks so as to look like trustworthy figures from old engravings. The yen for Latin liturgy, which helps us not to listen to what the Liturgy is actually saying, is at its fullest spate. The church is in a state of panic.

Lay people are just as much in the grip of this famine-like disease: they will not listen to the word of God, they choose what they will hear and refuse: how do loyal Catholics prefer to do what some nun or priest said to them in their childhood, even when it means refusing the clear command of Christ Jesus himself - take this all of you, and drink of it? How do such refuseniks tell themselves they are doing the right thing? If they had been taught to burn heretics or witches, would they obey that as well? You know, I'm afraid they would; and the scene in Northern Ireland ten years ago assures me that I'm right.

The Word of God is alive and active; it judges what is hidden in our minds and hearts. I've never learned anything important without feeling I've lost something important; that is what the Word of God does. If you have three weeks at a time where you don't feel that, you've wasted three weeks of your time on earth. Because the prophets have huge things to teach us, and we all have huge distances to travel. Let us begin where we are, and expect to hear what will change us from what we've been into a new Creation. Nothing less is listening to God.