Bill Kupersmith
612 Dearborn Street
Iowa City IA 52240

The Baptist Loses His Head: A Sermon Preached at New Song Episcopal Church, Coralville, Iowa, the 14th July 2024, the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Six weeks ago, between field hockey tournaments in Antwerp and London, I visited the beautiful Belgian medieval city of Brugge to soak up some culture, and there I was gobsmaked by a brilliant depiction of today's lesson from Saint Mark's gospel which you heard Lori proclaim. I have provided a visual aid for you to share with your neigbours, and if you look at the lower left corner you'll see what jumped out at me. In the fifteenth-century Bruges (the name of the city in French) was ruled by the Dukes of Burgundy, whom I first discovered as an undergraduate in a book by the early twentieth-century Dutch historian Jacob Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages.* These rulers had wonderfully colourful names like John the Fearless, Philip the Good, and Charles the Bold. An even memorable nickname belonged to Charles the Bold's half-brother Anthony, *le grand Bâtard de Bourgogne* (yes, you got it – his real title, the big bastard of Burgundy!) But it was the bourgeois who were the real source of the city's wealth. Brugge was a major port. The wool from English sheep in Norfolk was shipped to the Netherlands to be finished as fine cloth. Which is why today you find such impressive churches in both countries; successful merchants endowed charitable works for the salvation of their souls, including works of art, especially altarpieces, which is where today's specimen comes from, a triptych by the fifteenth-century painter Hans Memling, who also specialised in portraits of the nobility and of his rich patrons. This triptych is still in its original home, the Old Saint John's Hospital, where monks and sisters cared for the sick poor. This hospital had both Saint Johns as patron saints, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist; the opposite wing of the triptych shows the other Saint John enjoying a spectacular apocalyptic vision that prefigures Hieronymus Bosch.

Saint John the Baptist ranks so high in the order of saints that he claims not one, but two feast days in the calendar of the Church. Recently we observed the Nativity of John the Baptist on 24 June. It's no coincidence that it should be exactly six months before Christmas, the Nativity of Jesus, or that it should also occur at the time of the summer solstice – the pagan holiday of Midsummer's Eve. (If you saw the movie *Midsommer* you know why the Church thought the newly converted pagans needed something else to think about on the shortest night of the year.) And on the 29th of August we have the commemoration of John's death, the Beheading of John the Baptist. There was also a Feast of the Finding of the Head of John the Baptist on the 24th of February, which Memling sneaked into the centre panel of this triptych.

Although the ancient Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Herod ordered John the Baptist executed, he is silent about the role in the affair of Herod's wife and step-daughter [our lectionary text today names her Herodias, but I prefer the traditional Salome]. I believe that Mark got the story from Saint Peter himself and that it probably repeats contemporary gossip – it there had

been tabloids in Jesus 'day, the Herodians would have been featured in every issue. There are also some clear echoes of the book of Esther in the story of Salome's dance and Herod's rash promise. Saint Mark also supplies an authentic detail, which Matthew missed when he copied the story from Mark. Herod didn't simply send a verbal order for John's execution, "he sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head." The word translated "soldier of the guard" is unusual, σπεκουλάτωρ, it's unique to Mark and not actually Greek at all, but Latin, the same as our word *speculator* (of course our speculators watch stock prices, not kings). That's just the sort of thing a *noveau riche* like Herod Agrippa would have done, naming his bodyguards after the Roman Emperor's. For me it's evidence that the story is historically true. Mark continued: The guardsman" went and beheaded [John] in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl." In the old translations, she's called a *damsel,* which sounds much classier to me.

In the centre foreground of the painting, we have Herod's bodyguard, wearing a strikingly modern costume – that long sleeved white top with the red neckline looks like something you could find at The Gap or Express, though now probably only in women's sizes, and contemporary men with trendy tastes would love those tan pointed shoes, along with his low waisted skinny trousers. Turning his back carelessly to the viewer shows he is mindless of the sinful nature of the deed. His extended arm holding the Baptist's head over the charger shows pride in his workmanship. Attending public executions was a popular pastime – Huiziga describes how late medieval rulers delighted in devising cruel spectacles to humiliate their enemies. Charles the Bold's motto was "Ie lai emprins bien avienge" which if my medieval French is to be trusted means "I fully intend to be well avenged." In the old days, if you were sentenced to lose you head, you bribed the headsman ahead of time to make sure the edge of his weapon was extra sharp. And your friends would be present at the execution with further gratuities to reward him for a job well done – not like the execution of the Duke of Monmouth in 1663 where the executioner slashed and hacked away multiple times to finish him off. As we look towards the lower left with our full-on view of the neck, we see he indeed made a good job of it.

Notice the man in the background centre with the white hat. Judging by the axe to his left, I reckon he's a gaoler or another of the bodyguard. His right arm is raised and his palm open towards the viewer. Is he cheering the other executioner's stroke, like a Dutch field hockey fan watching Yibbi Jansen *execute* a perfect drag flick? Or is he pleading his innocence – after all, John the Baptist was very popular – saying, "Don't blame me. *I* didn't do it!" And Salome too faces outward with her eyes half shut and a serene but reserved expression, as if thinking, "Oh the things I have to do to please mother! First it was all those dance lessons, and now this!" After spending several hours in the UI art library and online, I still don't know who the good-looking man in the red leggings and gorgeous doublet on the left is. Maybe he's supposed to be one of Herod's courtiers and the chap with the red hat and the beard beside him may be Herod himself – his robe is the same colour green as Salome's, which could show they belong to the same family. But notice how Mr. Red Leggings is holding his stomach; the spectacle probably makes him a bit queasy.

According to Huizinga, those early Flemish painters differed greatly from later Renaissance artists like Michelangelo, who were most eager to show off their mastery of technique, to have

their creations to be admired as works of art. A painter of the late Middle Ages, in contrast, wasn't trying to create a work of art. Instead, he was telling a story. Specifically, in works like our triptych, it was a sacred story. Its purpose is to raise the mind and heart of the viewer to the spiritual significance of the subject, so that gazing at the painting actually becomes a form of prayer. What might a late medieval Fleming have seen in this panel of Memling's altarpiece?

We should remember: Memling's first viewers weren't art historians or tourists soaking up culture. They would have been kneeling in prayer before the altar in the hospital chapel, perhaps related to or caring for some poor dying patient at the hospital. And gazing at Memling's painting, the onlooker sees that John has most literally been sacrificed, like the Pascal lamb. John prefigured Jesus and launched Jesus 'career, and now in the foreground he anticipates Jesus ' death. At the top of the panel we see tiny figures, Jesus being baptised by John, while hovering at the top like a flying saucer is the eye of God, seeing all. Bad things happened at the whim of cruel rulers then, as they occur now. But God sees all, and will bring all things to a perfect end. And unlike today, at least in the waning of the Middle Ages, the cruel rulers had good fashion sense.