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Gospel: Mark 6: 14-29

I love movies. I especially love those old black and white movies from the 1940s and 50s, the ones about murder and crime. Movie critics and film historians call these movies *film noir*. My second favorite *film noir* movie is a movie named *Sunset Boulevard*.

Sunset Boulevard is about an out-of-work screenwriter in L.A. named Joe Gillis and a retired Hollywood actress named Norma Desmond. Norma Desmond misses her old life of fame and glamour and desperately wants to return to the spotlight. So she hires Joe Gillis to help her write a movie to restart her career. I won't spoil the rest of the movie for you, but their relationship ultimately leads to death and tragedy.

There is one curious detail about the movie *Sunset Boulevard*, which I have never heard any film critic talk about. That detail is that the movie within the movie, the movie which Joe Gillis and Norma Desmond are writing, is movie about the beheading of John the Baptist. And so with this curious detail in mind, I think we can use *Sunset Boulevard* and *film noir* to help us understand today's Gospel passage.

There are two archetypal characters we find in *film noir*. The first is the antihero. In *film noir*, the main character is not your traditional good guy. He is not admirable or virtuous. Rather, the main character is an antihero: someone who is morally ambiguous, someone who lacks fortitude. Herod in today's gospel is an antihero. He is definitely not a good guy, but he isn't exactly a villain either. He doesn't kill John the Baptist out of vengeance or wickedness. Saint Mark even tells us that Herod liked John the Baptist. Rather, Herod killed John because he was a coward. He was a coward, who did not want to look bad in front of a crowd.

The second kind of character you find in *film noir* is the *femme fatale*. The *femme fatale* is a woman who uses her feminine wiles to get what she wants. Herodias is a *femme fatale*. She manipulates her husband. She manipulates her daughter. She uses them to get her way. And like all other *femme fatales*, her schemes lead to compromising, dangerous, and deadly situations.

Parallel to the curious detail in *Sunset Boulevard*, there is another curious detail, a curious detail about today's Gospel passage. This second curious detail is that the beheading of John the Baptist is the only story in the Gospel according to Saint Mark that does not contain Jesus. And so with this curious detail in mind, I think we can use today's Gospel passage to help us understand *film noir* and *Sunset Boulevard*.

Film noir is simply French for black film. These movies are called that because they are so dark. They are full of shady characters and grotesque situations. They are dark in mood and in content and especially in appearance. They are dark in appearance because they are shot with little to no light. Film historians argue that movie makers did that because it saved money. However, I think the movie *Sunset Boulevard* points out the real reason. *Film noir* gets its inspiration from today's Gospel passage. *Film noir* is dark because it lacks the light of Christ.

Joe Gillis, the out-of-work screenwriter from *Sunset Boulevard*, was a coward like Herod. He had plenty of opportunities to escape the schemes of Norma Desmond. But he was afraid to leave the comfort that she offered him. He sought refuge in her schemes rather than seeking refuge in the light of Christ. He couldn't follow the words of today's responsorial psalm: "God is a shield to all who take refuge in him." Joe Gillis, like many other *film noir* antiheroes, lacked the virtue, the strength, the fortitude that the light of Christ could offer him.

Norma Desmond, the *femme fatale*, she manipulated and she used people like Herodias. She did so because she hungered and thirsted and lusted after the attention she used to get when

was famous. She wanted to shine in front of everyone. She wanted to shine with the light from those big, old studio lamps, not with the light of Christ. She too couldn't follow today's responsorial psalm. She could not pray the words: "Extolled be God my savior" because she was too busy extolling herself.

In contrast to all of this, in contrast to Joe and Norma, Herod and Herodias, we have the person of John the Baptist sitting in a prison cell awaiting his death.

Unlike the antiheroes who are cowards, who refuse to take refuge in God, we have the person of John the Baptist, meditating day and night on the words of Christ, finding peace and solace in those words which John's disciples sent him: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk ... the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them."

Unlike the *femme fatales* who take pleasure in manipulating others and in extolling themselves, we have the person of John the Baptist who said, "So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease."

We all like to think that we are more like John the Baptist than we are like Joe and Norma, Herod and Herodias. But like the movies I love, I am a bit pessimistic.

We are all cowards and manipulators. Like Herod, we want to look good in front of a crowd. Like Norma Desmond, we want to be in the spotlight. We are all afraid of being left out, being forgotten, being ignored. We are all afraid of fading into the background like the white walls of a hallway.

And so we manipulate others. We use them to make ourselves feel better. We tear others down to build ourselves up. We manipulate our conversations, drawing attention to our good

deeds and to the faults of others. We manipulate our social media with our tweets and hashtags, with our photo-bombs and selfies. All of us are ready for our close-ups.

And in these manipulations, in these false forms of attention, we try to find our dignity. Rather than find our dignity in being children of the light, we try to find it in controlling others and forcing them to like us. We all commit these sins of pride.

And so I conclude this homily, with a little bit of practical advice. There is a certain prayer that I think we all need to pray. It is called the Litany of Humility. Look it up and pray it tonight, tomorrow, or sometime this weekend.

And when we do, pay attention to these couple of lines: “From the desire of being esteemed, deliver me, Jesus. That others may increase and I may decrease, Jesus grant me the grace to desire it”

I believe the Litany of Humility can serve as a remedy to heal us from our cowardice, heal us from our manipulations. I believe the Litany of Humility can fill us with the light of Christ, that light which overcomes the darkness that we see in *film noir*, that light which shone upon John the Baptist in his prison cell.