After hearing todays Gospel story its hard to say at the end "Thanks be to God!". Perhaps we should skip this story and read the next week one instead. It's a much happier story about Jesus feeding 5,000 hungry people. Isn't it strange? Herod's horrible banquet runs right into the story where Jesus makes sure that everyone is fed. Mark wants us to hear these two stories together. Even though we didn't hear that other story, I hope you remember at least something about Jesus feeding the 5,000. It's a story found in all four gospels.

Mark has placed these two stories side by side. He wants us to see the stark contrasts between two very different banquets. Hard as it is to listen, let's go back to Herod's story. This feast was not in a deserted place, but in a lavish palace. There wasn't a large crowd, but a select guest list of important officials. Herod's wife, Herodias, was there, even though she shouldn't have been. Herod had stolen her from his brother. John the Baptist had condemned this unlawful connection, and for that John landed in prison.

Herod liked to listen to John, which was odd indeed for John preached repentance wherever he went. Was there something inside Herod that remembered God's word, …some spark of God that drew him to John's teaching? But he had promised Herodias' daughter that he would give her anything she wanted. "Even half of my kingdom," he said. He never dreamt she would ask for John's head. He was grieved at her request--grieved because he feared the crowd beyond his palace, for they revered John as a prophet. Grieved also because he was still drawn to what John said. But his guests had heard his oath. How could he disappoint his guests? Who knows what the officers might tell someone higher up? So, Herod gave the command, and soon the head of John the Baptist was brought out on a platter, as thought it was the last course of the meal. This was a very different banquet. Not the abundance of Jesus' feast. Not twelve baskets of food left over, but a horrifying leftover: John the Baptist's head served on a platter.

Herod could have made a different choice, but the empire had replaced God in his life. Though he loved to listen to John the Baptist, he couldn't risk his own reputation to spare John's life. The empire shaped his values and his decisions. Feeding hungry crowds was not on Herod's agenda.

Is it possible to maintain an empire and feed people who are hungry?The leftovers of empire have almost always been destruction and death--even in the name of peace and security. There is always enough money for weapons, but never enough to feed those who are hungry. Into such a world, Jesus comes with an alternative vision. "*The kingdom of God has come near you,"* he said. Over and over, he taught about it, told parables about it, and lived it wherever he went.   When the hour grew late, the disciples said, "*This is a deserted place...send the crowds away so that they may go into the village and buy food for themselves*." Everything rational shouts, "Good idea!" Herod would have said, "Great idea!" Send them away. But Jesus said, "*They need not go away; you give them something to eat*."

But, Jesus, we can't. You have to understand. Hunger is a very complicated global problem. If we give money to poor countries, corrupt leaders divert donations for their own personal use. The needs are too immense--we don't know where to start. I don't have the time or the wisdom to figure out what to do. Even if I did, I'm only one person. I have only five loaves and two fish.

Our lives are filled with choices. Herod chose loyalty to the empire. He presided over a banquet of death. Jesus called his disciples to make a choice: "You give them something to eat." They could have said "no" for they had only five loaves and two fish--just enough to feed themselves. But Jesus called them beyond themselves. They did have something. You have something. And so do I. Jesus blesses and multiplies what we bring. When that happens, there will be a banquet of life for everyone. Amen.