

August 29th: Memorial of the Passion of Saint John the Baptist

Gospel text (Mk 6:17-29): Herod was the one who had John the Baptist arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, whom he had married. John had said to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” Herodias harbored a grudge against him and wanted to kill him but was unable to do so. Herod feared John, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man, and kept him in custody. When he heard him speak he was very much perplexed, yet he liked to listen to him.

She had an opportunity one day when Herod, on his birthday, gave a banquet for his courtiers, his military officers, and the leading men of Galilee. Herodias’ own daughter came in and performed a dance that delighted Herod and his guests. The king said to the girl, “Ask of me whatever you wish and I will grant it to you.” He even swore many things to her, “I will grant you whatever you ask of me, even to half of my kingdom.” She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the Baptist.” The girl hurried back to the king’s presence and made her request, “I want you to give me at once on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” The king was deeply distressed, but because of his oaths and the guests he did not wish to break his word to her. So he promptly dispatched an executioner with orders to bring back his head. He went off and beheaded him in the prison. He brought in the head on a platter and gave it to the girl. The girl in turn gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

“John had said to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’”

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Today, we remember the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist, the Messiah's Precursor. All his life moves around Jesus, to the extent that without Him, the very existence and aim of the Messiah's Precursor would have had no significance whatsoever.

From his mother's womb, the Baptist already senses the nearness of the Savior. Mary and Elisabeth embrace, two future mothers, which opens up the dialogue between the two infants: the Savior sanctified John, and John enthusiastically jumped inside his mother's womb.

In his mission as Forerunner John kept this enthusiasm —whose etymological meaning is “to be full of God”. To those ends, he prepared the path Jesus was to follow, he smoothed the way and leveled off mounds for Him, he announced Jesus’ presence, and pointed Him out as the Messiah: “Behold, the Lamb of God” (Jn 1:36).

In the dusk of his existence, when preaching the messianic freedom to those enslaved by their vices, John is imprisoned: “John had said to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife’” (Mk 6:18). Thus, the testimony of the martyrdom of John the Baptist is centered upon the Person of Jesus. John the Baptist was Jesus' Forerunner in life, and he preceded Him also in his cruel death.

Saint Bede the Venerable tells us: “There is no doubt that blessed John suffered imprisonment and chains as a witness to our Redeemer, whose forerunner he was, and gave his life for him... He was locked away in the darkness of prison, though he came bearing witness to the Light of life and deserved to be called a bright and shining lamp by that Light itself, which is Christ.”

Let us hope that this day, when the remembrance of the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist, overwhelms us, and full of God we may valiantly bear witness to our faith in Jesus. Like John, our Christian life must also be centered on the Person of Jesus, which gives it its full meaning and implication.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

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“In persecution God crowns loyal military service; in peace purity of conscience is crowned” (St. Cyprian)

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“Saint John the Baptist was faithful to the Lord to the end. He drew multitudes of sinners to God. And all this he did, not thanks to his great qualities, or to his enormous apostolates. What attracted him the most was his example of fidelity and his total surrender to God, to the point of shedding his blood rather than betraying his conscience.” (Francis)

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“St. John the Baptist is the Lord's immediate precursor (...). Going before Jesus "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Lk 1:17), he bears witness to Christ in his preaching, by his Baptism of conversion, and through his martyrdom.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 523)