

August 29th: Beheading of John the Baptist, martyr

Gospel text (Mk 6,17-29): Herod had sent to have John arrested, and had him chained up in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife whom he had married. For John had told him, «It is not right for you to live with your brother's wife». So Herodias held a grudge against John and wanted to kill him, but she could not because Herod respected John. He knew John to be an upright and holy man and kept him safe. And he liked listening to him, although he became very disturbed whenever he heard him.

Herodias had her chance on Herod's birthday, when he gave a dinner for all the senior government officials, military chiefs and the leaders of Galilee. On that occasion the daughter of Herodias came in and danced; and she delighted Herod and his guests. The king said to the girl, «Ask me for anything you want and I will give it to you». And he went so far as to say with many oaths, «I will give you anything you ask, even half my kingdom». She went out to consult her mother, «What shall I ask for?». The mother replied, «The head of John the Baptist». The girl hurried to the king and made her request: «I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist, here and now, on a dish». The king was very displeased, but he would not refuse in front of his guests because of his oaths. So he sent one of the bodyguards with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded John in prison; then he brought the head on a dish and gave it to the girl. And the girl gave it to her mother. When John's disciples heard of this, they came and took his body and buried it.

«For John had told him, ‘It is not right for you to live with 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, 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 he kept this enthusiasm, —whose etymological meaning is “to be full of God”—, he prepared the path Jesus was to follow, he smoothed the way and leveled off mounds for Him, he announced Him when already present and pointed Him out as the Messiah: «Look, 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: «For John had told Herod, ‘It is not right for you to live with your brother's wife’» (Mk 6:18). 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.

St. Beda tells us «He was locked away in the darkness of prison, through 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. (...). 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».

Let us hope that this day, when we remember the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, martyr, overwhelms us, in its etymological meaning of the word, and thus, full of God, may we valiantly bear witness of our faith in Jesus. That our Christian life may also move around the Person of Jesus, which will grant it his full meaning and implication.