

August 29: Beheading of John the Baptist

Gospel for August 29th, feast of the Passion of Saint John the Baptist.

Gospel (*Mk* 6:17-29)

Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because he had married her. For John said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and

holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." And she went out, and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the baptizer." And she came in immediately with haste to the king, and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And the king was exceedingly sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his

word to her. And immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard and gave orders to bring his head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother.

When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

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Commentary

All of the Gospels, when recounting the beginning of Jesus' public life, show us the scene of his Baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. People were coming from Jerusalem and all of Judea to listen to John the Baptist and let themselves be baptized by him in the river, confessing their sins (cf. *Mk* 1:5). John's fame grew to such an extent

that many wondered whether he might in fact be the Messiah. But as the evangelist John emphasizes, he flatly denied it: "I am not the Christ" (*Jn* 1:20).

John the Baptist is the first "witness" to Jesus, having received instructions from Heaven: "I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit' (*Jn* 1:33). And when Jesus was baptized by him, John saw the Spirit descend on Him in the form of a dove. It was then that he knew the full reality of Jesus of Nazareth, and began to make him known to Israel (cf. *Jn* 1:31), pointing to Him as the Son of God and Redeemer of mankind: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (*Jn* 1:29).

We see in today's Gospel passage how Herod admires John and listens to him with pleasure, but nevertheless ends up having him beheaded. This great change takes place in a very short time. First he unjustly imprisons John. Then, as the result of a feast marked by a lewd show, he orders that John be beheaded. This passage shows us the power of sin. Sin is like a spiral that entraps us in a vicious circle. When we open our heart to sin, it can lead us to commit even greater crimes. Hence we see the need to repent of any sin quickly and go to confession whenever necessary, where God forgives us and helps us begin again. With the help of God's grace, we always have the possibility of defeating sin.

“As an authentic prophet, John bore witness to the truth without compromise. He denounced transgressions of God's commandments, even when it was

the powerful who were responsible for them. Thus, when he accused Herod and Herodias of adultery, he paid with his life, sealing with martyrdom his service to Christ who is Truth in person. Let us invoke his intercession, together with that of Mary Most Holy, so that also in our day the Church will remain ever faithful to Christ and courageously witness to his truth and his love for all men and women” (Benedict XVI, Angelus, June 24, 2007).

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