

But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." [Mark 6.16; ESV]

The beheading of the martyr, St. John the Baptizer is an important Scriptural event, recorded in the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which we consider on the basis of the Holy Gospel for this Day.

I.

The word "martyr" comes from the New Testament Greek, where it's primary meaning is "witness." Today, the word is understood to mean "one who sacrifices," especially one who sacrifices life itself. St. John the Baptizer is a martyr, and in his death, he clearly is a witness for the cause of Christ. New Testament Christians regarded the full expression of "martyrdom," which is death itself, as a privilege. Perhaps the reasoning is as simple as this: "After all, you have to die anyway. Why wait to die due to the ravages of disease, or due to the deterioration of the aging process, or due to the rage of war and terror, or due to the consequences of a stupid action, when,

instead, one can die due to a being a witness to Christ – especially when the consequences of life and death are already settled and assured for the faithful?" Thus, martyrdom comes to be viewed in the Early Church as a privilege.

St. John the Baptizer is the first adult to receive this honor. And King Herod is the human agency through which this honor comes. King Herod doesn't want it that way. For, the reason John is in prison is so that Herod can protect the him from his wife, Herodias.

Herodias is a granddaughter of King Herod the Great, the king who was alive at the birth of Christ. Philip is one of Herod the Great's sons, as is this current Herod in our text, known as Herod Antipas. So when Herodias marries Philip, her uncle, the sin of incest is committed, in accordance with the Old Testament and according to our own ways of reckoning. When she is enticed away from Philip to become the wife of Herod Antipas, another uncle, and yet another incestuous

relationship, St. John the Baptizer condemns this whole affair, calling it what it is, sinful and an offense against God. For that, Herodias seeks to have John killed. Herod puts him in prison so that Herodias cannot get to him to fulfill her wish. Hardly does Herod conceive that this move will shortly seal the fate and the martyrdom of John the Baptizer. But, another of King Herod's many failings is about to spoil his plan.

II.

Finally, the day of martyrdom arrives. Mark calls it in Greek a "strategic day," a "day of opportunity." It is first of all a day of opportunity for Herod to fall victim to his own sins of lust and pride. He throws a banquet, and at this banquet he and his guests are entertained by the lewd and provocative dancing of his wife's daughter (and his niece). To show off to the well-pleased guests, Herod speaks to the girl, taking a public oath, saying, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half

my kingdom." The girl confers with her mother, Herodias. "What shall I ask for?" she inquires. Mom has the quick and sly answer: "Ask for the John the Baptizer." Now, Herod is in a bind. Mark writes, "Although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her." So, the protective prison cell of John was shortly turned into his execution room and the place of his martyrdom for Christ. And King Herod, in his sin, his pride, his guilt, and his fears, is left to be stalked by what has happened, so much so that he confuses about Christ, and he never recovers from haunting reality of his deed.

III.

This is the true misery of martyrdom. It is not the dying that is the misery, though we in our safe homes might think that a martyr's death is, well, an unthinkable misery. No, the misery of martyrdom is not dying. The misery of martyrdom is living and seeing the martyr and still not understanding the

message of that witness.

The misery of martyrdom is for those who do not “get it.” It is misery to those who do not get it, because they fail to receive the martyr’s witness, and it is even more misery to those who don’t get it, because they shrink from making the witness for fear of the martyrdom that might follow.

This is the sinful flesh at work, always aiming to defeat Christ and His Word. This sinful flesh possesses you as it possesses me. And so the opportunities for the witness, the martyr, continually come our way, and we fear, and we shrink back, and we excuse ourselves, and then, when the Word of God speaks of the witness, of the martyr, we know the guilt of the true “misery of martyrdom.”

There is a better way to deal with the haunting unpleasantness of the martyr. It is the way of

repentance. After all, the problem here is the sinful flesh. And you can’t solve that problem yourself. There is no right behavior or right thinking or right choices that will stop the sinful flesh from having its way in your life. But there is repentance. There is the humility before God and His Word that the Holy Spirit works in you, which we call “faith.” Your God-given faith is the solution to the sinful flesh. Faith eats, drinks, lives, sleeps, and breathes repentance and humility before God, because it believes God, who says, “Come unto me!” Today, God’s Word speaks this assurance that God loves you, wants you, forgives you, and, yes, cherishes you. Faith believes that, and clings to that in repentance and humility. And thus faith sees what human nature cannot see: The chance to speak what you believe is no danger. It’s just being who you are in Christ.