

## THE MARTYRDOM OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Amos 7. 7-15

Ephesians 1. 3-14

Mark 6. 14-29

I speak to you + in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

In our gospel reading last week taken from the beginning of Mark 6, we learnt that Jesus' disciples were engaging in missionary outreach. They were going from town to town, sharing the good news of the gospel and preaching repentance. And as they stepped out in faith, their witness had great effect. People who had been possessed by demons were delivered of them; and many sick people were anointed with oil and healed.

Yet today's gospel reading reminds us that during those same days, there was nonetheless on-going opposition to the kingdom message. As we read the story of the martyrdom of St John the Baptist, we see that sharing the gospel does not always produce a widespread and warm response. To the contrary, such sharing can even sharpen the opposition's attack in a most bitter way.

Our passage in Mark 6 is the *one* story in the gospel of St Mark that does not focus on Jesus; and in it, Mark both hints at what is in store for Jesus and shows us that often, sacrifice is the way of true discipleship for all believers.

King Herod (also known as Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to 39 AD), had received reports of Jesus. The text does not say what Herod had heard, exactly; it could have been news of the disciples' recent effective mission, or it could have been news of Jesus' ministry in general, which seems more likely. And when

Herod says, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised”, we see that he identifies Jesus with John the Baptist and recognises that Jesus is indeed the successor to John.<sup>1</sup>

This recognition by Herod allows St Mark to introduce us to the story of how John the Baptist died. John had consistently told Herod that he had broken holy law by taking his brother’s wife Herodias.<sup>2</sup> Herod had rejected his first wife, the daughter of Aretas, King of Arabia; and Herodias had deserted or divorced her husband in order to be with Herod. John had not let them forget this, and both Herod and Herodias reacted differently.

Herod imprisoned John, partly to keep him safe (6. 17, 20) and also because he did not wish such public criticism to be voiced by a renowned prophet and preacher. Yet Herod did not wish to put John to death, as Herodias did (6. 19). Rather, he listened to John often with a mixture of fear, enjoyment and inner disturbance. But to listen to and provide protection for this “righteous and holy man” (6. 20) was not enough when the battle became fiercest. Sides had to be taken, for and against; and Herod’s middle way of indecision proved in the end to be wholly inadequate.

The scene that occurs at Herod’s birthday banquet provides Herodias with just the opportunity that she has been looking for. When the semi-intoxicated king foolishly promises up to one-half of his kingdom to his beautiful, dancing daughter (who by the way in some accounts is given the name Salomé), he finds himself trapped. He must now fulfil his rash vow, and quickly; much to the delight of the malicious Herodias.

John the Baptist, the one who “prepared the way” for Jesus, dies because of his faithfulness. We begin to see now why Jesus does not encourage discipleship purely on the basis of hearing his teaching, or simply observing his miracles and following

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark presents John the Baptist not only as the forerunner of Jesus, but also as a prototype of Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lv 18. 16, 20. 21.

with the crowd. To be a disciple, as St Mark will continue to tell us in the second half of his gospel, means following Jesus; and often this will lead to sacrifice on our part. As John the Baptist said, speaking of Jesus in another gospel, “He must increase, but I must decrease.”<sup>3</sup>

St Mark may well have been sending this message to readers of his own time. There has always been a tendency in Christianity to lay too much stress on the miraculous, the exciting, and the triumphal nature of Christian experience. The difficulty with this is that while such a presentation is initially attractive and effective, especially for young people, it often proves to be inadequate when one has to cope with the wide spectrum of life’s experiences and human personalities.

St Mark’s picture is meant to correct such a one-sided view. John the Baptist’s discipleship was not like that. Nor, more significantly, was the pattern of Jesus’ obedient sonship. With all of his evident power and perception, Jesus goes steadfastly to Jerusalem and to death, because the realities of evil, goodness, hate and love required it. Similarly, John the Baptist’s death shows that no shallow triumphalism will do. We Christians are called to be faithful witnesses, and there will be a price to pay. For John the Baptist, it was the ultimate price.

We might be wondering, “What does being a disciple of Jesus offer, then?” It offers the satisfaction that one is living according to eternal truth; that one is walking with Jesus; that one is giving oneself in love to the service of God in the world. Our reward will not necessarily be public success; nor will it be an unending stream of triumphant experiences (even though these may come). Our reward is the deep-down knowledge and assurance that we are faithfully serving God’s purposes in the world. This knowledge not only anchors us on our Christian walk; it also enables us to advance and grow. “He must increase, but I must decrease.” +

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jn 3. 30.