

Christianity isn't for weaklings. To be sure, the blessed virgin Mary, whom the church commemorated two weeks ago, is the clearest and best example of the Christian believer. She boasts entirely in her Lord, magnifies His name, trusts in His Word even when it is beyond her understanding, and entrusts herself to His will. But do not mistake the gentle humility and faith of Mary to which we all ought to aspire for weakness. And so the holy church also gives us the godly example of St. John the Baptist, that strange, fascinating man who has no regard for men of position, in whom all the fiery preaching and bizarre appearance of the prophets of old are concentrated, distilled to the highest proof.

He blasts both barrels at lecherous Herod, a playboy who would fit in today quite well, living with his half-brother's wife. John has no qualms about telling Herod that his adultery is not lawful; a bold thing to say to a king! John rightly gives public rebuke to public sin. But eventually he is cast into prison. No doubt his voice continued to ring out, echoing the Scriptures from his prison cell, for manmade walls cannot silence the Word of God. But at least the troublesome voice wasn't sounding among the crowds.

It is a common but false idea in the church today that it is only persecution if you suffer for the sake of preaching the Gospel, the forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of Jesus. But what lands John in prison, what stokes the grudge of Herodias unto her plot to silence John once for all, is not his proclaiming Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is imprisoned for defending holy marriage, saying that a man and woman living together when one of them is married to another is a sin. We live today in a time when men and women live together and don't even bother to get married. John is hated not just for proclaiming the Gospel, but for preaching the Law. He dares to call sin what it is, doesn't care that it is a king whom he warns of hellfire and calls to repentance that he too might find refuge in the Messiah's sacrifice.

God grant us such boldness today. For the faith into which you are baptized is not one that turns a blind eye to sin. The church that can no longer say what sin is according to the Word of God, is soon incapable of preaching the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. As was shared with you last Sunday, our God has spoken clearly of His will for us in this body and life. In this evil age, it is our task to confess the truth. And as with John in his day, so too a part of our confession is God's institution of holy marriage.

And we like this fiery preaching of John when it is directed at Herod. We rejoice when the church boldly confesses the truth about sin, and the call to repentance is directed towards others that they might repent and receive forgiveness. But I imagine you don't like it all when that fiery call of repentance is turned on you, directed toward your sins, and you are the one bid to repent in heart and life, to set aside your vices and sins, and change your ways.

It is not Herod whom John and all the prophets call to repent today; it is you. It is deadly serious business; your life depends on it. Because it is not lawful for you to think the things that you think, to say the things you say, to do the things that you do. It is not lawful to covet the provocative allurements of this world, whether they are dancing girls, accounts full of cash, or just more stuff. It is not lawful to fear the opinions of man more than the one true God. It is not lawful to hurt those unable to protect and defend themselves by the hatred and enmity in your heart. It is not lawful for you to do any of these things, nor a thousand other similar sins.

The temptation, as it was with Herod, is to add sin upon sin, to make things far worse, to silence God's will for you, keep it on a leash, at arm's length, locked up in a cage, demand that it only speak when spoken to and to the limit that we permit. Repent! Or you will lose far more than half of your kingdom, more than your head and more than your body.

But here is the irony, here is the true boldness of John and of all Christianity: those who save their life for the sake of this world will lose it forever in the dungeon prepared for the devil and his angels, and those who hate their life in this world, willing to lose it for the sake of Christ and His Word will save it for eternal life.

To repent and to be baptized is to put your own head on the chopping block, to bare your neck to the sword, the sword of the Spirit, which continually puts the sin in your flesh to death, and, as God wills it, to the temporal sword of unbelievers. It is not fun and games. It is a fearful and deadly encounter. The Holy Scriptures present no sanitized fairy tale. No one gets out alive, or unbloody. One way or the other, you are called upon to die, whether for life in Christ through death having already died with Him, His blood put upon you, or with your own blood upon your head into the second death forever.

You must hear St. John's stern preaching of the Law. Hear and heed that preaching: Repent! For the One greater than John is at hand, and John has told you that this One holds His rod, ready to cleanse the threshing floor to gather the wheat into His barn and to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Repent! But also see that John points to Him as He has come already, as that Lamb of God who has taken away your sins, who submits Himself to death and the grave on your behalf, who raises you up with Himself, in body and soul, unto newness of life.

St. John's entire life, his ministry, his preaching and baptism of repentance, his suffering, and finally even his death, are a witness and proclamation of this Lord Jesus Christ, of His cross and passion, and of His resurrection from the dead. Everything about John — from his miraculous conception and birth, to the waters of the Jordan River to the depths of Herod's dungeon and, finally, the tomb in which he is buried — everything about John is wrapped up in Jesus and points to Jesus. John and Jesus are inseparable. Already at his naming John is called the Forerunner of the Christ, to go before the face of the Lord to prepare His Way. He makes way by preaching repentance for sin, and points his blessed finger to the Savior from your sins.

And, because the Way of the Lord is the way of the Cross, the way of suffering and death, that is where St. John the Baptist goes. That is where anyone who preaches and baptizes in the Name of the Lord Jesus goes. And it is no less so for those who are baptized into Him, who are given the Cross to bear and are called to follow after Him, even to the point of death. The Lord's people, His saints, are so wrapped up in Him, so identified with Him, and so also named by Him as Christians, that the world sees Christ Jesus in them. Herod was exactly right; he could not shake the impression in hearing about Jesus that he was John the Baptist risen from the dead.

For those who die with Christ Jesus, like St. John and all the baptized, His Resurrection is their resurrection and their life. His Resurrection is your resurrection and your life. It is in Christ that St. John and all the baptized are righteous and holy. It is in Him that you are holy and righteous in his sight, blameless, innocent, and pure before God the Father in heaven. It is in that sure and certain hope, in that confidence of Christ and His Gospel, that the disciples of St. John lay his body to rest in the grave, to await the resurrection of his body on the last day.

And already, the souls of those who have been slain for the sake of the Word of God, and all those who have departed from this mortal life in the faith of Christ, now find their peace and rest in Him, under His altar in heaven. So also it shall be for you, whether it is wearing a martyr's crown or a simple death in the faith that will be your entrance into glory. Baptized into Christ, you have already died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. In life and death, in body and soul, as you carry the Cross in your stations in life, and as your body is laid to rest in the dust of the earth, you are safe and secure in your crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

This is not pie in the sky hope, this is not consolation for weak people. This is the confidence given by He who died and now lives, confidence given to John and to you. It is given as He prepares a Table before you in the presence of your enemies, each and all of whom He has defeated for you by His own Cross. It is a Banquet, not for His own benefit — not that He be served, but that He serves you — to forgive you all your sins, to give you His own life, to fortify you, to make you strong in Him that you may contend in this life as long as He gives you breath, and to save both your body and soul forever and ever.