

Pastor T.C. Arnold
The Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist
August 29th, 2010
Mark 6:14-29 / John 3:26-30

*“So they came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing and everyone is coming to him.’ John answered and said, ‘No one can receive anything except what has been given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said [that] I am not the Messiah, but that I was sent before him... So this joy of mine has been made complete. **He must increase; I must decrease**” (John 3:26–30).*

The Church, having celebrated the earthly birthday of St. John the Baptist on June 24, today honors the anniversary of his martyrdom. Besides our Lord Jesus, St. John the Baptist is the only one whose birth and death we celebrate in this way.

This great religious reformer was sent by God to prepare the people for the Messiah. His vocation was one of selfless giving. The only power that he claimed was the Spirit of Yahweh. *“I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11).* Scripture tells us that many people followed John looking to him for hope, perhaps in anticipation of some great messianic power. John never allowed himself the false honor of receiving these people for his own glory. He knew his calling was one of preparation. When the time came, he led his disciples to Jesus: *“The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God.’ The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus” (John 1:35-37).* It is John the Baptist who has pointed the way to Christ. John’s life and death were a giving over of self for God and other people. Confident of God’s grace, he had the courage to speak words of condemnation or repentance, of salvation.

And that is exactly what got John the Baptizer in the predicament he finds himself in the text appointed for this day. Herod Antipus, the culprit who put John into prison, believed He had no choice. His wife, Herodias, was sick and tired of hearing what John had to say. Herod threw him into prison because his wife demanded it. I guess even for men in powerful positions – leaders of many and those vested with authority – are still bound to do what their wives say they should.

I’m not so sure that Herod wanted to throw John in jail. As is evidenced at the beginning of the Gospel reading for today, some would tell Herod that, *“John had been raised from the dead and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.”* Herod approached John with a sense of fear and respect. Overall, Herod was not doing what he wanted to do – but what his wife wanted. She was tired of hearing how her marriage to Herod was a sham and was wrong in every way (remember, Herodias was Herod’s brother’s wife – and Philip, the brother, was still alive). I think Herod felt as if he had no choice. But this was all a part of the beginning of what John said before – *“He must increase; I must decrease.”* Herodias would make sure John would “decrease.”

You see, this is the thing with men like John the Baptizer. They were not about themselves. For that reason, he must decrease. John was preparing the way for the Savior. John wanted everyone to follow Jesus, not him. But the way that John “decreased” might not have been done in the way we thought he might do it. When people decrease it would seem as though we would hear less from them and not more.

But in John’s case, as he decreases, you hear, “more.” However, you don’t hear “more” about John. You hear more about what is right. John becomes even louder and more vocal for the truth. He doesn’t mince words. He doesn’t dance around the issues. He calls the thing what it is – and if it is wrong – He will definitely make sure the perpetrators hear about it. John doesn’t decrease by keeping his mouth shut. He “decreases” by opening his mouth and exposing the law – God’s Word – to those who need to hear the law. Herod Antipus and Herodias were living in a relationship that was not God

pleasing. John didn't keep his mouth shut about it. Herodias didn't like that – so she devised a way to make sure John would decrease even more -- all the way to prison and the grave.

Opening our big fat mouths get us in trouble at times – much like it got John in trouble. There are times to open our mouths and there are times to keep it shut. John did it the right way – even though it would mean his personal demise. We, however, are quick to say what we think. And being quick about saying what we think is not always good. The reason: sometimes what pops into our head is not helpful to a person or situation. Rather, it is harmful. But we are so ready to share what's on our mind. We don't care who we hurt or what relationships we destroy. We speak without first thinking: How is what I'm going to say be constructive to this current situation? How is my reaction going to be perceived by others? How will what I say reflect on me, my family, my church? And if you are saying to yourself right now – “I don't care what people think. I will say whatever is on my mind” – you might want to stop and think about that reaction.

Obviously John didn't hold his tongue. But John did stand in defense of the truth of God's Word. John didn't say what he said to lord himself over Herod and Herodias – he did it because what they were doing was wrong and he wasn't going to let it go like everyone else had already done. This is how John would decrease and allow the Word of God – even Christ Himself – to increase. The truth must increase even at the expense of the life of John. It's strange to say it this way – but this was John's destiny. This was his very purpose. He spoke the truth at his own expense and it cost him his life.

It's hard to imagine not being able to speak the truth. It's hard to imagine being thrown into prison or even suffering death because the right thing is being said. It happens in our world all the time. Never take for granted those freedoms, beloved in the Lord. Wouldn't it be a tragedy if we no longer could speak the truth in love? So speak the truth – because we are free to do so. And don't be so quick to speak freely – especially at someone else's expense, just because we are free to do so. Our goal is that of John's – us decreasing and Christ increasing. When we speak to satisfy ourselves – or to hurt others – we are attempting to increase.

John the Baptist's head on a platter – his martyrdom – was the result of a man speaking the truth – not just what was on his mind. There is a difference. And thank God there is a difference. What is on our mind should always be held in check by the Word of God. It was that way for our Savior too. Jesus was not too fond of what would be ahead of him in Jerusalem on Good Friday. He pleaded with the Father about having that cup of crucifixion taken from Him. On His mind was the pain, suffering and death. Fear gripped our Savior in the Garden of Gethsemane. But even “more” on His mind was you. Your sins and your life were on His mind. He said the right things before that Sanhedrin and before Pilate. He said and did the right things – as Jesus would decrease for us on the cross – so that we may now increase in stature before the Heavenly Father. Jesus' humiliating death meant the exaltation of His precious children. He said and did the right things for the sake of those He loves so much – YOU!

John the Baptizer prepared the way of the Lord – He made the path straight for Him. What does this mean? It means that the truth could be clearly seen. It was spoken plainly. And even though there are those who don't like the truth – it is still the truth – and it must be spoken. Speak the truth in love, beloved in the Lord. The truth is the Word. The Word is the Savior. Speak the Savior – so that He may increase. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.