

3. February 2023

God above all

Mk 6:14-29

*At that time King Herod had heard about Jesus, since by now his name was well known. Some were saying, 'John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him. Others said, 'He is Elijah,' others again, 'He is a prophet, like the prophets we used to have.' But when Herod heard this he said, 'It is John whose head I cut off; he has risen from the dead.' Now it was this same Herod who had sent to have John arrested, and had had him chained up in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife whom he had married. For John had told Herod, 'It is against the law for you to have your brother's wife.' As for Herodias, she was furious with him and wanted to kill him, but she was not able to do so, because Herod was in awe of John, knowing him to be a good and upright man, and gave him his protection. When he had heard him speak he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him. An opportunity came on Herod's birthday when he gave a banquet for the nobles of his court, for his army officers and for the leading figures in Galilee. When the daughter of this same Herodias came in and danced, she delighted Herod and his guests; so the king said to the girl, 'Ask me anything you like and I will give it you. And he swore her an oath, 'I will give you anything you ask, even half my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the Baptist.' The girl at once rushed back to the king and made her request, 'I want you to give me John the Baptist's head, immediately, on a dish. The king was deeply distressed but, thinking of the oaths he had sworn and of his guests, he was reluctant to break his word to her. At once the king sent one of the bodyguard with orders to bring John's head. The man went off and beheaded him in the prison; then he brought the head on a dish and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When John's disciples heard about this, they came and took his body and laid it a tomb.*

Today's Gospel presents us with the sad reality that the prophet, who speaks at God's command, becomes an obstacle to the powerful. The powerful are often in danger of becoming a law unto themselves, instead of submitting to God's law, a presumption that will sooner or later befall them if they do not convert.

Thus we see in today's Gospel the sad figure of Herod, who allows himself to be blinded by the eroticism of Herodias' daughter. And then, when the young woman, influenced by her ungodly mother, demands the beheading of the Baptist, the king is too cowardly to retract his oath in front of all the guests. We see here the perfidy of the vengeful Herodias!

All this contrasts sharply with the figure of the Baptist, who knows he is committed to the Law of God and is not afraid to bear witness before the powerful. One of the difficult tasks of the prophet is precisely to assert the Word of God and to point out when its precepts are being violated. It is therefore a mission that can only be carried out in humility, and only God probes deeply into his service, to give him his deserved reward. Such a ministry can cost the prophet his life, as it does here in the case of John the Baptist.

To follow God's truth, to obey his irrevocable commandments and to submit to them... This is a call that we Catholics must put into practice, to become in our own way a prophetic sign in this world and to be "salt of the earth" (cf. Mt 5:13).

But what happens if the salt becomes bland?

It would be a great tragedy for the world, for who would then proclaim the truth to it? Would it not suffocate in its own errors, which would hang over it like a dense, black fog, because of the progressive de-Christianisation and the proliferation of terrible sins? *"With the increase of lawlessness, love in most people will grow cold"* (Mt 24:12), so that men's hearts will be surrounded like a sheet of ice.

There is no alternative! It is up to us Christians to bring the light of truth everywhere, without making false concessions. We cannot adapt our way of thinking and acting to the mentality of the world and ultimately to the "prince of this world".

John the Baptist teaches us the way forward, and Holy Scripture shows us in countless passages that truth is above life itself. We need courage in a time when the world has moved so far away from God's truth: the courage of John, the courage of so many confessors and martyrs, the courage to be a "sign of contradiction" for the sake of truth (cf. Lk 2:34), the courage to accept disadvantages and to be rejected....

This is not an easy task, but Jesus tells us very clearly that if we confess him before men, he will confess us before the angels of God (Lk 12:8).

God Himself will grant us the spirit of fortitude. But we must not give ourselves a false image of courage, as if we would fearlessly defy all dangers like the heroes in the movies. Brave is the one who, in spite of fear and trepidation, does what he believes God wants of him. We are all capable of this, each of us in our own place.

But it is important for us to be clear that we must stand up for and confess the truth of our holy faith. If we allow ourselves to be infected by the spirit of relativism, if the contents of the faith are weakened in their pastoral application, then we cannot be confessors. In this case, we would be, so to speak, corrupted from within, and it might even happen that, instead of confessing the faith, we avoid doing so and look for ways that please people. But these are not the ways of the Lord.

Far be it from us to have such an attitude! May St. John the Baptist intercede for us, so that we may stand firm in the truth, even in the face of "kings" who do not want to submit to it.