

29. August 2024

Beheading of St John the Baptist

Mk 6:14-29

King Herod had heard about him, 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 in a tomb.

It was a tragic end for John the Baptist, but in the eyes of God he is very much to honor.

John gives his life for the commandments of the Lord, which are so holy for him that he makes no compromises. God is more important than the transient earthly life. John knows this and therefore does not remain silent before the powerful who we can see

today in Herod. This is the attitude of a true prophet, enlightened and strengthened by God, who proclaims God's unchanging holiness. It proves that John loves God more than himself. In this spirit we all have to give witness for the Lord whom we have recognized as our beloved master.

But how can this attitude be achieved, given that human respects often prevent us from taking a clear stand?

Everything depends on the depth of the relationship with God and how the spirit of strength becomes real in us. If we truly learn to love God, then the unordered self-love increasingly will go away. We no longer protect ourselves constantly and fear disadvantages for our person. The mind is busy with what pleases God and seeks always and everywhere to find out his will and to do it.

This is a way that asks for the daily self-overcoming and with this self-overcoming gradually dissolves the unhealthy concentration to ourselves.

Thus John's zeal for the Lord is not diminished by the danger which awaits him, and of which he was well aware. If he had concentrated on this fear instead of the fulfillment of the will of God, then he would have been paralyzed inwardly and would not have dared to speak out the will of God before the "mighty one". Obviously, in John, the Spirit of Strength, far beyond personal courage, was present, a strength that each one of us can also ask God for.

Not every one of us is called to resist a "powerful one" right in the face. But the example of the Baptist helps us to be aware that we also should act before God and not living in the fear of man if we are called to be witnesses. Not what other people think about us is crucial, but how our lives are before the eyes of God.

Herod, blinded by lust, is unable to free himself from the expectations of those present. Although he knows that he is doing wrong to John, and even became very sad, as the text tells us, Herodes is committed to the crime.

He had received his power from the Romans and was not aware of God's power like John. Such is the case with the rulers of this world, who do not understand that they primarily have to justify their actions before God and not just before men. In the case

of Herod, human respects are also added (*For more on "human respects", see the meditation of 10 November 2021: <http://en.elijamission.net/the-unfreedoms-ii-human-respects/>*). He feared for his honor and reputation before men. But every vow is not valid, if it is the practice of an evil act, just as in obedience no morally reprehensible actions may be done. Although Herod gladly listened to John, Herod did not end his relationship with Herodias and remained in sin.

Herodias acted maliciously and exploited the weakness of Herod to avenge herself. If certain people do not want to listen to the prophets, then they try to silence them and do not even shrink from the murder.

John was one of those sacrifices that will come again and again if they are true witnesses of God, for "*the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not seized it.*" (Jn 1:5) It remains the consolation that God made John's life so bright that it still shines today and invites us to follow our path in Christ and not to shrink from being His witnesses even in today's often godless world!