

## IN THE WAY

Today we commemorate the beheading of St. John the Baptist, as described in the Gospel according to St. Mark (6: 14-30):

And king Herod heard of him; (for his name was spread abroad) and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him. Others said, That it is Elias. And others said, that it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets. But when Herod heard thereof, he said, it is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead. For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her. For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not: For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee; And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist. And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison, And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother. And when his disciples heard of it, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb. And the apostles gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what they had done, and what they had taught.

The beheading of St. John the Baptist is considered by the Church to be martyrdom. But the circumstances surrounding his martyrdom were somewhat atypical, when we consider the martyrdom of many confessors and witnesses that followed.

St. John was born through an act of divine grace, given a singular purpose in life, that of the Forerunner of our Saviour, as announced by the Archangel Gabriel:

And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:17)

St. John's whole life purpose was summarized in one, profound, salvific pronouncement: Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand (Matthew 3:2). This call drew many souls to the Jordan River, where he baptized them. But St. John didn't just draw common folks to the Jordan with his message, he took his message of repentance "to the top", the regional King Herod who was engaged in an unlawful and incestuous relationship with his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. This bold pronouncement of St. John was not "hate speech", (using modern day parlance with evolving social norms), but, on the contrary, was driven by love, namely, a desire to save a soul from eternal perdition through corrective repentance and the recruitment of divine forgiveness. Sadly, this wasn't seen quite that way by Herodias, who was drawn into a venomous disdain for St. John, desiring his death. After the Baptism of our Saviour in the Jordan by St. John, Herod arrested St. John and put him in prison. [St. John said of our Saviour: He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:30).] In that regard, St. John was placed "out of sight, out of mind", languishing in prison for an entire year before the events that unfolded during the horrific birthday party of Herod.

What drove Herodias to succumb to such a murderous desire? Sequestration and silencing of St. John in prison wasn't good enough. Was it simply blind rage? Enhanced by drunken revelry? To better understand this through spiritual eyes, let us see what St. Justin Popovich writes:

On Great Friday, people murdered God, crucified God. On today's holy great feast, people murdered the greatest of all men. It is not I who chose to use the expression "the greatest." What are my praises of the great and glorious Forerunner of the Lord, whom the Lord praised more than anyone among men, more than any apostles, the Angels, the Prophets, the Righteous Ones, the Sages? For the Lord declared of him: *Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist...* (Matthew 11:11). In all Creation, there exists no greater praise.

This is why today is a little Great Friday. Consider: senseless people murder the greatest of the righteous. Is he **getting in their way**? Yes, he gets between the perverse King Herod and the dissolute Herodias. God's Truth, God's immutable Truth **gets in the way** of the lawless, **gets in the way** of poor sinners, **gets in the way** of everyone stupefied by various passions.

This helps us better understand the motivation and source of such a murderous intention.

The term “hate” is casually tossed around in these times, readily and blindly applied to poorly tolerated pronouncements of truth, God’s law and universal morality. Herodias’ action can unequivocally be characterized as truly hateful. Holy Scripture speaks about the source of this hate:

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved (John 3: 19-20).

The world hateth me, because I testify of it, that the works are evil (John 7:7)

If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of this world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you (John 15:19).

St. John the Baptist, who was filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:15), and therefore emanated the salvific Light of Christ’s redemption of mankind and call to repentance, invited not only the spiritually thirsty and truth seekers, but also attracted the wrath and indignation of the unrepentant, who saw him as being... “in the way”. We too, followers of our Saviour, are called to acquire the Holy Spirit (St. Seraphim, Conversation with N.A. Motovilov) and become bearers of the Light of Christ:

Let your light so shine before men (Matthew 5:16).

As such, if we, with God’s help, are successful in becoming the bearers of the Light of Christ, attracted will be the spiritually thirsty, the seekers of Truth, and potentially the wrathful and indignant. This reveals the tumultuous landscape of battle that rages on in the frontier of this world, a battle that began with the empowering of the evil one through man’s fall into sin. St. Macarius the Great describes this poignantly and beautifully:

The world that you see around you, from the king to the beggar, are all in confusion and disorder and battle, and none of them knows the reason, or that it is the manifestation of the evil which crept in through Adam’s disobedience, *the sting of death*. For the sin which crept in, being kind of an invisible power of Satan, and a reality, implanted all evils. Without being detected it works upon the inner man and upon the mind, and contends with the thoughts; but men are not aware that they are doing these things at the instigation of an alien force. They think it all to be natural, and that they do these things of their own determination, while those

who have peace of Christ in their minds, and His enlightenment, know very well the source of these movements.

The world is subject to the lust of evil, and knows it not, and there is an unclean fire which kindles the heart, and so spreads into all the members, and disposes men to lasciviousness and a thousand wrongs things. Those who let themselves be tickled and pleased with it commit the sin inwardly in the heart, and thus the evil gets room, and they fall into open impurity. Mark that the same is true of the love of money, and of vainglory, pride, envy, anger, etc.

But the prudent, when passions bestir themselves, will not comply, but are angry with the evil desires, and make themselves enemies to themselves. For Satan has a great wish to rest and stretch himself in the soul, and is annoyed and cramped when the soul will not comply with him.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the world continues as a battlefield, with good battling evil, from the time of man's fall, to Herod's time, and especially current times.

On this day, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the 15<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the evil destruction of the World Trade Center, I am reminded of a specific message impressed by our authorities to the general public for many weeks in the aftermath of the tragedy: remain vigilant... Keep your eyes open. Be careful. Report anything suspicious, etc. etc. In a much broader spiritual context, our Saviour calls each of us to be vigilant, everyday of our lives: Watch and pray (Matthew 26: 41). Our watchfulness should be focused on the insidious and malicious barrage of passions, and guarding ourselves from the enticements and seductions of the evil one. Recall that the evil one seduced Eve into the sin of disobedience, who then, seduced Adam. This "chain of seduction", this strategy of the evil one, is just as active today as ever, given the proliferation of the masses who have fallen away from Christ and who, "at the instigation of an alien force" (as St. Macarius cites), propagate the chain of seduction, albeit unknowingly. Our Saviour provides us with the principle means to do battle, with two specific weapons at hand: prayer and fasting (Matthew 17:21). The prayers offered to us by Christ and His Church are clear and instructive:

Keep me from the snare which they have laid for me, and from the stumbling blocks of them that work iniquity. (Ps. 140)

I entreat Thee to receive me, so that I may now partake of Thy life-giving, blameless Mysteries, and not suffer condemnation; That as Thou didst say, thou mightiest dwell with me, who am thrice-wretched; Lest that foul deceiver find me all bereft of Thy divine grace, and most guilefully seduce me, and with scheming cunning lure me from Thy words which make me Godlike. (Pre-Communion Prayer of St. Symeon the Theologian)

...And Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (The Lord's Prayer)

May the intercessions of our holy St. John the Baptist bring us vigilance, prudence, faith and the Light of Christ, strengthening us to "fight the good fight" and embrace, through our actions, his call to repentance.

REPENT, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.