

Homily based on the readings from August 2, 2025 (Leviticus 25.1, 8-17; Matthew 14.1-12)

John the Baptist is one of the most fascinating figures in any of the four Gospels. Even though he did not have many direct interactions with Jesus, his presence was felt long after his death. For many people at the time, John the Baptist served as a point of reference – the closest thing they could find to a precedent for Christ’s earthly ministry. As we heard in today’s reading, Herod even believed that Jesus was some sort of reincarnation of John – a prospect that understandably filled him with dread.

There is one question relating to the life of John the Baptist that particularly deserves our attention: what was it that actually led to his execution? There were several contributing factors – John’s *uncompromising* honesty, Herodias’s *vengeful* anger – but what truly sealed his fate was Herod’s *febleness* in the face of social pressure:

The king was distressed,  
but because of his oaths and the guests who were present,  
he ordered that it be given, and he had John beheaded in the prison.

Herod was probably the only person living in Galilee at the time who did not need to fear, at some level, for his own personal safety. There was no risk of him losing his life, his liberty, his throne, or even his possessions – *all* that was at stake was his reputation among his dinner guests. Nevertheless, he still succumbed to this *ridiculous* demand from his stepdaughter, and so an innocent man – a prophet of the Lord – wound up losing his life.

Even though none of our lives bear much resemblance to Herod's, there is an important lesson here for all of us. Without a doubt, there are parts of the world – even today – where Christians are likely to be murdered on account of their faith. At least for the moment, however, we do not live in such a place. It is true that, in some professions, Christians face subtle forms of workplace discrimination – missing out on promotions

and other opportunities for advancement. For the most part, though, the only cost of being Christian in today's society is the possibility of scorn and ridicule.

In a certain sense, this type of persecution is even more pernicious than overt acts of violence. I expect each of us can identify at least one *tiny* act of denial we have *personally* made to avoid an unpleasant confrontation. If we multiply that by hundreds of times in our own life, and then by millions of self-professed Christians, we begin to see why society is in the state it is. Sometimes a tyrannical ruler – such as Henry VIII, Hitler, or Stalin – forces his country away from its faith but, more often than not, the faith *withers* on its own, due to countless *unremarkable* acts of cowardice.

Very few Christians have the opportunity to make grand gestures that demonstrably change the course of human history – yet all of us, if we live out our lives faithfully, can give witness to the eternal truth of Jesus Christ. Our task is to emulate the disciples of John, who quietly *risked*

their lives to bury the body of their prophet. Whatever the cost of discipleship, Jesus is worth it. No punishment that the world devises can *ever* outweigh the promise that Christ has given us – not a seat at Herod’s salacious birthday dinner, but an *eternal* place at the wedding feast of the Lamb.