

We most often picture John the Baptist on the banks of the river Jordan, preaching a baptism of penance for the remission of sins. The mission of his preaching and baptisms was to prepare the way for the Messiah. The Gospel of John says of him that, "He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light (John 1:8). John the Baptist would be heard to say:

I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16).

John the Baptist was to prepare the way of the Lord, and he did this not only by his preaching and baptizing, but by his life. In John the Baptist, we see a prophetic image of Christ.

There is a long list of striking parallels between John and Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah to

announce the conception of John, and he appears to Mary to announce the conception of Jesus. Zechariah does *not* believe, and so is struck mute, while Mary *believes*. John is *filled* with the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15); Mary is *overshadowed* by the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth was beyond her childbearing years, and Mary was a virgin; she did not know man. Both conceptions were miraculous. John was not named by his father, and Jesus was not named by Joseph. Both were given their names by God through the angel Gabriel. Both John and Jesus escaped Herod's rampage to murder children two and younger. John and Jesus both preached repentance and did not mince words when it came to telling the truth. Thus did John anger King Herod by confronting his immorality, as did Jesus anger the Scribes and the Pharisees because of their hypocrisy. John was arrested and so was Jesus. John, a

<sup>1</sup> <https://thecatholicspirit.com/commentary/hotdish/john-and-jesus-remarkable-similarities/>

holy and innocent man, was beheaded. Jesus who was innocent of any crime was crucified. They both died at about the same age. And finally, the disciples of John the Baptist came to retrieve his body to place it in a tomb, which our Lord's disciples also did for Jesus.

John's witness to Jesus, then, was not only his preaching; it was John himself, his very life and person. Jesus declared of John that he was the "greatest of those born of women". John's greatness was such that many suspected that he was the Messiah. Thus, John was a witness to Christ in his likeness to our Savior. John's life was a reflection of Jesus.

Herod murdered John and Pilate murdered Jesus. Herod and Pilate represent the mentality and ways of the world. They were so caught up in the world, and of such weak moral character, that they both failed to do the right thing. They abandoned the innocent for their own self interests. This

relationship between Pilate and Jesus, and between Herod and John the Baptist has much to teach us.

Jesus tells us, quite clearly, that following Him will not lead to riches, a life of pleasure and ease, and certainly, not worldly popularity. The Lord says,

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (Jn 15:18–19).

Our Lord also says, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers treated the false prophets in the same way" (Luke 6:26). The point here is that if we are following the Lord faithfully, we should expect persecution. In 1 John 3:13 it says, "Do not be astonished, brethren, that the world hates you". The world is sick with egoism and self-centeredness. Being arrogant, self-willed and prideful are exulted to the point of being virtues. Freedom is considered

nothing more than a license to do whatever I please, rather than the freedom to know what is good and to do it. Human freedom means that we can love. We can choose among good things, and freely will and do the good for ourselves, for others and for the glory God. Animals cannot do this; they cannot love because they are not free; they have no free will. Yet, so often, men act more like animals whose freedom is simply like that of a dog that is let off his leash to run wild.

Such is what we see in King Herod. In front of his guests, his pride and his passions rule him. Herodias' daughter, with her dancing, gave Herod such pleasure that he makes an oath to give her anything she wishes, even half of his kingdom. Herod, however, was not actually a king and since he was subservient to Rome, he had no authority to

subdivide any of the territory over which he was in charge. But such was Herod's massive ego that he would say these things.

So now, having made an offer to the young lady, that he could not have fulfilled anyway, she comes back with her mother's evil request to murder John the Baptist. But it was not just to murder him. She wanted John's head *on a platter*. This was at a banquet, Herod's birthday party, and she has John's head brought in on a serving dish. The whole scene is sickening, macabre, like a modern horror film. Imagine being at this party and eating off platters like the one with John's head on it. It's as if the Baptist's head was one of the courses at Herod's birthday banquet.<sup>2</sup>

This is horrifying, but no more horrifying, perhaps even less horrifying, than the kinds of things that the worldlings do

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<sup>2</sup> John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 200.

today. I don't need to list those things for you here. But isn't it astonishing that "Herod was not ashamed to bring before his guests the head of a murdered man"?<sup>3</sup> Herod's calloused narcissism, then, drove him to murder John whom he knew full well to be a just and holy man.<sup>4</sup> In the words, of Theophilaktos, the Archbishop of Ohrid (1050-1107):

For during the banquet, Satan danced in the person of the damsel, and the wicked oath is completed [...] Herod not being his own master, but full of lust, fulfilled his oath, and slew the just man; it would have been better however to break his oath, than to commit so great a sin.<sup>5</sup>

John, then, prepared the way for our Lord, by his life, imprisonment and martyrdom. We see in John the pattern of Jesus Christ, who would be abandoned, hated, and brutally

put to death by Pilate. Pilate, of course, committed the greater evil by having crucified our Divine Savior.

Like Herod, many are unable to bear the truth and wish to silence the Gospel. We see persecution in our country on the rise today, and attacks on religious freedom. We may have to face persecution in our country, even if only in relatively small ways for *now*. But let this be a reminder of our brothers and sisters who are suffering tremendously around the world. Seventy-five percent of all religiously-motivated violence is suffered by Christians. One out of every 8 Christians suffers some severe form of persecution across some 145 countries.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, who are they persecuting, but the image of Jesus Christ Himself? As our Lord said to Saul

<sup>3</sup> Bede, Venerable, Presbyter and Monk of Yarrow, A.D. 700 in Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Mark*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 2 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1842), 117.

<sup>4</sup> Remigius, Presbyter and Monk of Auxerre, A.D. 880 in Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Mark*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 2 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1842), 115.

<sup>5</sup> Theophilaktos, Archbishop of Ohrid, A.D. 1078 in Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Mark*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 2 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1842), 116.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.churchinneed.org/christian-persecution/>

on the road to Damascus, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me” (Acts 9:4).

Let us, then, stand firm in faithfulness to Jesus, no matter what we might have to endure. Let us call on the intercessory prayers of St. John the Baptist, who gave his life to prepare the way of the Lord, that we might have life by receiving Him. Let us call on the Baptist to pray for us, that the Lord would give us the grace we need to remain faithful, such that the world would see in our lives an image of Jesus Christ, even in our suffering and death.