

MARK 6:14-29 // THE BEHEADING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

The Gospel of Mark was written shortly after the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70. This was a catastrophic time - one in which many thousands of Jews were killed by the Romans or driven from the city. Josephus describes the fall of the temple like this:

As the legions charged in, neither persuasion nor threat could check their impetuosity: passion alone was in command. Crowded together around the entrances many were trampled by their friends, many fell among the still hot and smoking ruins of the colonnades and died as miserably as the defeated... everywhere was slaughter and flight. Most of the victims were peaceful citizens, weak and unarmed, butchered wherever they were caught. Round the Altar the heaps of corpses grew higher and higher, while down the Sanctuary steps poured a river of blood.

And this attack on the Temple took place just a few days before Passover so the Temple was full of Jews, not only from Jerusalem but people who had traveled there for the Holy days from all over the region.

And this was a culmination moment after years of fighting - the Jews had rebelled against Roman rule in the year 66 and there were many violent battles for four long years - and so we can only imagine how despairing, how overwhelmed, exhausted and grieving the readers of Mark's gospel would have been.

It is important to remember that the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of Jewish life - not only religious life but political and economic and cultural life as well - it was the largest employer in the region as well as being the most holy place - and this devastating loss meant the loss of social status, loss of material goods, loss of home and community, as people were killed or fled the city

And if Jewish life was so irrevocably disrupted, Jewish-Christian life probably more so being such a new sect. Mark is writing to these Jewish Christians so that all the stories of Jesus' miracles, his ministry, his crucifixion and resurrection could be shared and remembered.

Mark's gospel was written with a sense of urgency. There are no genealogies, no birth stories, no angels or magi or shepherds - but it begins with a prophesy from Isaiah: "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness; Prepare the way of the Lord"

And then we have a picture of John the baptizer in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem came out to see him. John was incredibly popular and people from all walks of life came to hear him preach and to be baptized by him.

In this first chapter verses 4-11 tell of John - including his baptism of Jesus in the Jordan - and then a single sentence in verse 14 letting us know that John was arrested and then there is nothing again until today's gospel passage about his death. And then nothing more.

And why this is striking is because John is such a deeply important character in the life of Jesus and in the faith life of Christians. This is John, the forerunner, the one who prepares the way for the coming of the Messiah, the Christ

So before I talk about John's death I want to say more about his life.

John knew about Jesus before he was born. When Mary came to visit Elizabeth, John leapt for joy in the womb, causing Elizabeth to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to cry out "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" - a prayer central to Catholics in the praying of the rosary

Little is known about John's childhood - but we do know that at a young age he went to live in the wilderness where he stayed for many years living a very ascetic life

About 10 years ago I went on a vision quest. The process was five days long with three days and two nights solo in the woods. We were a group of four who were questing but each of us went to a different spot out of sight or hearing of each other. We were not allowed to bring a tent but could have a tarp as cover in case of rain. We had no food, only water to drink. We had to stay within a certain radius and so no long walks. No reading material, certainly no cell phones, nothing to distract from the instruction to listen and watch and pray.

Those three days seemed an eternity. And, although I benefited greatly from the experience I have to admit that I was complaining internally for almost the whole time I was there. There were the bugs. I was hungry. I had a hard time sleeping for fear of some wild animal coming to get me. I was lonely. I wanted to quit - began having thoughts about what a stupid idea this was and what was the point of doing this.... But at a certain point I could feel a stillness growing within me or around me. My solitude no longer felt uncomfortable, the quiet was not so quiet as I heard the birds and the rustle of the trees and the bubbling of the stream nearby

as if music. I felt a peace and a trust and a faith there and began to let God work on me.

That was three days. John was in the wilderness for decades. He was solitary, or perhaps it is better to think of him as being alone with God. God was preparing him for his task - to usher the Messiah into the world.

And John had no confusion as to what his role was

He is leading people forward to the coming of the kingdom of God through Jesus, the Son of God. But he is also representing a continuity with the prophets of the Old Testament and he is a bridge between the promises of the God of Israel and the fulfillment of the coming of the Messiah.

He is fearless - unafraid to confront the problems of his day - a fearless preacher he had no trouble pointing out what was wrong and calling for repentance, for a turn, a change of heart, a new way, a way of peace and love. There is no grey area with John. He is totally black and white. He expects only 100% He spoke truth to power - and he didn't take power - but he had power. He did not accept the status quo especially regarding matters of justice. And this is what gets him imprisoned by Herod. He tells Herod it is unlawful for him to be married to his brothers wife - and I won't go into the back story of the immorality of the whole Herod family - but it was pretty bad.

Herod puts John in prison. But he goes and listens to John. He likes to listen to him - even though he doesn't understand him. Herod feared John, knowing he was a righteous and holy man - and even though he imprisoned him he also protected him.

But then the shocking outcome - the weak and conflicted Herod is persuaded to order the beheading of John. And after his death John's disciples come and take his body and lay it in a tomb.

There are many myths about what happened to John's head. Some say Herodius buried it in a dung heap. Others say that Herod and Herodius buried it under their palace. In another story Saint Joanna who was married to one of Herod's stewards secretly takes the head and buries it in the Mount of Olives.

The image of St. John the Baptist's head became an image for contemplation about how evil co-exists with righteousness in this world. An image that starkly shows the clash between the kingdom on earth and the Kingdom of Heaven. In late medieval England large numbers of alabaster sculptures of John's head were manufactured as a devotional image for the home.

And other imagery of John - over the centuries there have been many paintings and icons of John. In every one he is pointing. He is pointing to Jesus or he is pointing to a symbol of Jesus. It is the entire purpose of his life - to show us - to lead us to the Son of God

He was a forerunner in his miraculous conception, a forerunner in his birth, a forerunner in his ministry - preparing a way. In eastern orthodox tradition it is believed that John at his death went down to Hades to wait there for Jesus preparing the dead for the resurrection - so was a forerunner in death as well.

St John the Baptist was the one who said “behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world” and these words are central to our Eucharistic liturgy.

John was a person who was completely filled with the Holy Spirit. His ministry was passionate and relentless. He baptized thousands of people and taught them about righteousness, about justice, about the one who is coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. He never witnessed Jesus’s miracles or heard his teachings but he knew him. And as Jesus’s following increases throughout the region, the ministry of John diminishes and then ceases. And John says as much: He must increase and I must decrease.

Yet John was the first martyr, the first Christian saint, the first to know and believe that prophecy was being fulfilled, no longer hoped for but already here.

In our time of great confusion and uncertainty, perhaps we can walk forward together contemplating the ways in which opposites can co-exist and know that God is working in us always. Perhaps we can take our time in the wilderness (literal or figurative) and find God in the silence, in the solitude and in the stillness so that God can prepare us for what we are called to do, even in our daily lives.

Amen