



The Beheading of St. John the Baptist and 9/11

We do not generally celebrate the birthdays of saints. We celebrate the date of their deaths, because how we end our lives is more important than how we begin them. However, St. John the Baptist is one of the two exceptions to this rule. We celebrate both the conception and the birth of St. John as well as the Theotokos, because these two people are the holiest of the saints. St. John was, we are told in the Gospels, filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15), and so he was a great saint, and the greatest of the Prophets.

Though the beheading of St. John the Baptist happened on Herod's birthday, it is the death of St. John we commemorate, not Herod's birthday, because Herod is remembered now only as a very evil and weak man..

The Herod of the Gospel we heard today is not the same as the Herod we hear about on Christmas. This was one of his sons. Herod the Great had five wives, and many children — several of whom he had executed, and so it was said of Herod that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. After Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided among the surviving sons, and so Herod Antipas was made a Tetrarch, who ruled Galilee and Perea. Galilee was the most prosperous area in the Holy Land. Perea was the land along the eastern bank of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

It's difficult to keep track of how the family was related to each other, because this was a family tree that didn't have a lot of branches. Herod Antipas, who was born of Herod's wife Malthake, and was first married to the daughter of King Aretas, a Nabatean King. Herodias was the Granddaughter of Herod the Great, whose grandmother was Mariamne the Hasmonean. She was first married to Herod Philip, another of Herod the Great Son's, by his wife Cleopatra of Jerusalem, and so was half brother to Herod Antipas. This made Herodias both Herod Antipas's niece, and his sister-in-law. Herodias had a daughter from Philip, named Salome — who was both Antipas' niece, and grandniece at the same time.

At one point, Antipas and Herodias were in Rome, and he seduced her. He convinced her to divorce her husband, and promised that he would divorce his wife, and then they would be married, and they both followed through, and were married, with complete disregard to the law of God forbidding the taking of another man's wife while he still lived, and also forbidding taking one's brother's wife at all if she already had a child from the brother.

St. John the Baptist did not say "Who am I to judge"? He did not say, "It is none of my business." He certainly did not say "Love wins!" as many in our culture today would be inclined to say. Instead he said "It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife" (Mark 6:18). He did not care what Roman law said. He did not care what Antipas said the law was. He only cared what the law of God said.

This, of course, did not set well with Herodias, who resented anyone speaking the truth about her. And so finally she persuaded Herod to arrest him, and he put him into prison in the palace fortress of Machaerus, which was on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea.

But what is strange is that having put this simple man into prison, "Herod feared John"(Mark 6:20). He was the man with the power. John was locked in a dungeon, and yet Herod feared him. He feared him



because he was a “holy and just man” (Mark 6:20), and he no doubt feared the people, who all thought St. John was a prophet.

However, we are also told that he often went to see John, and “heard him gladly” (Mark 6:20). He was torn, because on the one hand, he had a sin he was not willing to give up – the sin of his adulterous and incestuous relationship with his brother’s wife. But on the other hand, he was drawn to the what St. John said, and to what St. John represented. Much like when we later hear of his nephew Agrippa, he was almost persuaded. When St. Paul appeared before Herod Agrippa, after hearing his testimony, he said “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28). And Antipas was almost persuaded to repent. However, “almost” only counts in horseshoes and hand-grenades. In the spiritual life, “almost” is not good enough.

So he wavered between two opinions. He would not repent, but he also would not give into the demands of his wife and put St. John to death.

Then, one day he threw himself a birthday party. We are told that “he made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee” (Mark 6:21). And then Salome, the daughter of Herodias, came in and shamelessly danced. This was not the normal behavior of a princess, but she had learned to be shameless from her mother. Antipas, who was no doubt somewhat drunk, was struck with lust for a woman who was his niece, his grandniece, and his step-daughter to boot. And he made a foolish oath: “Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee.” And he then swore: “Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom” (Mark 6:23). Some also think that this amounted to a marriage proposal, because normally a ruler shares half of his kingdom only with his queen. She might have asked for all sorts of riches, the possibilities were great, but instead she went and consulted with her mother, and her mother told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. And to make sure that Herod was not given an opportunity to change his made, she demanded that it be given to her on a platter, right then. Rather than renounce a foolish oath, Herod, because he feared the opinion of those who were at his party, gave in:

“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” (Mark 6:27-28).

Herod’s conscience troubled him. We know this because we were told at the beginning of today’s reading, that when he heard of Christ, he was convinced that this was St. John the Baptist, come back from the dead (Mark 6:14-16).

We hear of Antipas one more time in the Gospels, on the night of Christ’s passion. St. Luke tells us that when Pilate heard that Christ was a Galilean, hoping to pass the buck, he sent him to Antipas, who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time.

“And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him. Then he questioned with him in many words; but he answered him nothing” (Luke 23:8-9).



He would have heard Christ gladly, as he had John, but Christ did not indulge him. He performed no miracle to impress him. And one thing that this tells us is that there comes a time when God will give up a man who continues to reject the call to repentance, and leave him to go his own way. Today, is the day of salvation. Now is the appointed time (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Since Christ would not provide him with with the entertainment that he had hoped for, we are told that he and his men treated Christ with contempt and mocked him, and “arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate” (Luke 23:11). And it happened that Pilate and Herod became friends (Luke 23:12). They previously had been enemies, but became friends in their opposition to Christ.

About a decade after all of this, Antipas fell out of favor. He went to Rome, but was accused of plotting against the Emperor by his nephew Agrippa, and so lost his rule, and was sent into exile with Herodias. No one knows exactly when or how Herod and Herodias died, and this is because no one thought it important enough to record it. In St. John’s Troparion, we are told “The memory of the righteous is celebrated with hymns of praise...” However, the Psalms tell us:

“Not so are the ungodly, not so; but rather they are like the chaff which the wind doth hurl away from the face of the earth. For this reason shall the ungodly not stand up in judgement, nor sinners in the council of the righteous. For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, and the way of the ungodly shall perish” (Psalm 1:4-6).

We celebrate another unhappy anniversary today — the fifteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. I do not believe it is coincidental that these attacks happened on the feast of the beheading of St. John the Baptist.*

St. John of Shanghai was the founder of [our cathedral in our nation’s capital, Washington, D.C.](#) Most parishes that are dedicated to St. John the Baptist celebrate the feast of his nativity, or the Synaxis of St. John the Baptist — because both feasts are usually not fast days, and when a parish celebrates a patronal feast, they, of course, like to do it on a day when they can eat whatever they want. However, the feast of the beheading of St. John the Baptist is always a fast day. There is never a year in which this day is another other than a fast day. And yet St. John insisted that they dedicate their cathedral to this feast. The people tried to convince him otherwise, but he warned them that unless they chose this feast, their parish would not prosper... and being fearful to go against such a warning from such a holy man, they relented.

I know that this story was not concocted to try to connect this feast with the 9/11 attacks, because I remember hearing it long before those attacks. Prior to 9/11, people just thought it was curious. Perhaps St. John simply wanted to encourage people to fast. However, after the 9/11 attacks this story was seen in a very different light. St. John the Baptist was a preacher of repentance. He warned that the axe is already laid to the root of the tree, and any tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire (Matthew 3:10). This means that the axe is already in position to start hacking away at the roots, and to chop the tree down, but there is still an opportunity for repentance.

Unfortunately, I remember how after 9/11 there was an upsurge in Church attendance. People seemed to be more interested in their faith. Like Herod, they heard the preaching of the word of God gladly. But it did not last. And look at what has happened since then. Our country has redefined marriage — the very issue that led to St. John being beheaded — and in a way that Herod could not even imagine. We have



thrown the law of God out of the window. And now, increasingly, we see Christ mocked in our culture.

We cannot have our cake and eat it to. This is true of us as a nation, and this is true of us as individuals. We cannot serve both God and our own lusts. We cannot call ourselves Christians, and do whatever we please, contrary to God' law. We have to choose this day whom we will serve, and we will have to live with that choice for all eternity. Regardless of what everyone else may do, we as Orthodox Christians must say "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

*It worth noting that [the comparable terrorist attack in the United Kingdom happened on July 7th, 2005](#), which on the Church calendar happens to be the feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist.