

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

Today's Gospel lesson is gruesome and shocking. It doesn't begin that way. Herod had heard of the things that Jesus was doing and wondered who is this Jesus. Some thought He was John the Baptist back from the dead. Others thought perhaps Elijah or another prophet. That sounds a lot like when Jesus asked His disciples what others were saying about Him and gave Peter the opportunity to confess: "*You are the Christ.*" Anyway, Herod himself thought the best answer was that Jesus was John the Baptist, even though he had killed him — Jesus come back from the dead. But this is when we hear the account of how John died — that's what's so grisly about this account, for Herod had John the Baptist beheaded.

Now, on the one hand, we hear of such things today — of Coptic Christians in Egypt, Ethiopian Christians in Libya, beheadings in France, England, Thailand, etc. They're on web if you want to see them. I did once. My curiosity got the better of me when Daniel Perl was killed. I don't really want to do that again, for on the other hand, it really was shocking for an American to watch. Our constitution prohibits "*cruel and unusual punishments,*" so that when capital punishment is carried out here, it's done in such a way as to minimize suffering, not maximize fear and suffering as these beheadings are meant to do.

Nevertheless, death remains a frightening thing — for me, at least — even without the added horror of a death like John the Baptist's. Even without suffering (for we have medicines that can relieve most pain) it is not easy to watch the life of being drained from your loved one. Death remains our enemy, and will until Christ returns in glory. As St. Paul writes, it's Christ's return in glory that signals the end of all things, and it's at that time "*when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*"

Not that there's any question that death will be defeated. It's assured, first because Jesus "*shared in [our] flesh and blood.*" He subjected Himself therefore to our weakness: to temptation, to suffering, to death. He partook of the very things that cause us to wonder and doubt and fear. And no one can escape them — not kings like David or Solomon or Jeroboam, nor prophets like Amos or John the Baptist.

It is instructive, isn't it, for us? They do remind us of what we're up against. And if John, the greatest of those born of women, as Jesus calls him, had to endure this, should I expect it to be any less so for me? If this prophet and more than a prophet, the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord, the one who points our way to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, had to endure this,

should we expect it to be any less for us? Jesus did not come to relieve us of suffering and persecution — rather He says expect it, and be called blessed when you suffer for His name's sake.

Therefore, Jesus became like us His brothers in every respect, second, even to the point of passing through death, not so that He might succumb to temptation or fear or death. No. He overcame temptation; He mastered fear. He defeated death. And that so that He might be that *“merciful and faithful high priest”* offering up the perfect sacrifice for our sins, and so that He might be that spotless Lamb that John proclaimed, the One who takes away our sins. He Himself passed through death into life that we might look to Him and believe in Him, and know that our faith in Him is not in vain nor is this preaching, that we might know that death is not the end, but that *“in Christ, we have hope [not] in this life only”* but in the next, in the everlasting kingdom of God. Christ was born into our flesh, died and was raised from death that we might know that *“by a man”* comes *“the resurrection of the dead,”* and that *“in Christ, shall all be made alive.”* Christ partook of all these things that we might know that *“through [His] death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”*

Of course, death still perplexes us, and understandably so. Death is a result of sin. St. Paul says, *“sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”* Death perplexes us because we know we are sinners, that we sin, and because we know the *“wages of sin is death.”* The death does not need to be as grisly as John the Baptist's to perplex us. It can be as shocking and unexpected as the faithful woman's whose funeral I attended on Friday, dying from injuries suffered in a horrific fall. Pastor Cage of St. Paul's did a good job of reminding the listeners of the perplexity of sin and death.

And yet, also the paradoxical gladness even in the face of death that we have as Christians, as John the Baptist did with Herod, which is where I'm heading with this sermon—to the verse, *“When [Herod] heard [John], he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.”* John was imprisoned because he greatly perplexed, and no doubt, continued to greatly perplex Herod by pointing out his sin. For Herod, it was especially the sin of marrying his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. What are your perplexing sins? Are they similarly sexual sins — perhaps lust, whether heterosexual or homosexual, or pornography, or unfaithfulness, or ungodly divorce? Are they greed, gluttony, or pride, accompanied by a heartless, uncaring attitude for your neighbor, or a chasing after this world's idols? Do you harbor hatred in your hearts and unforgiveness? Do you use your tongue for

slander and cursing rather than to bless? Rightly do our sin and sin-caused death greatly perplex us. Repent! That was also one of John's great gifts: calling people to repentance.

But then to speak a word that causes gladness. Hear this gladly. As you have already heard a bit of it, hear it again, and never tire of hearing it: you are blessed by God the Father in Christ. He has "*blessed [you] ... with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.*" The Father "*chose [you] in [Christ] before the foundation of the world,*" chose you "*for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ,*" chose you "*according to the purpose of his will,*" chose you according to "*his glorious grace, with which he has blessed [you] in the Beloved,*" that is, in Christ, the Father's beloved Son. He has blessed you by sending His only Son to be your redeemer, effecting your "*redemption through His blood,*" and by that blood giving you "*the forgiveness of our trespasses*" — it's a gift of His grace. Let this make you glad in the midst of your perplexing sins, that they are not counted against you, but rather that God accounts you "*holy and blameless before him.*"

It's why we come to church — I hope it's what you expect to hear in church, whether at a funeral as I did on Friday, or every Sunday — to hear "*the riches of his grace ... lavished upon [you],*" to hear His "*wisdom and insight,*" "*the mystery of his will,*" "*his purpose, which he set forth in Christ,*" His plan for your salvation made in eternity before the world was made, put into action in "*the fullness of time,*" in Christ "*born of woman, born under the law, to redeem [you] who were under the law,*" and then "*to unite all things in him ...*," that you might find your "*hope in Christ ... to the praise of His glory,*" knowing that this all happens for you as you are brought into Christ, when you are given birth (or shall I say rebirth) into Christ "*according to the counsel of his will,*" through the waters of Holy Baptism and "*were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.*" It happened as "*you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him,*" and were glad that even you, a poor sinner, perplexed by death, have, in Christ, "*the guarantee of [your] inheritance*" as you await Christ's return and your "*possession*" of that eternal life for which you wait "*to the praise of his glory.*" Isn't that also why you will come to this table in a few short moments: as sinners perplexed by your sin, but glad to receive what Christ gives you in this Supper, by His body and blood, to receive another seal of His promise of forgiveness and life and salvation "*to the praise of His glory*"?

Dear saints in Christ — in Christ, (be sure to take your Scripture insert home with you and look again at the epistle and pay attention to those words: in Christ, in Him, before Him, through Him, in the Beloved) you are saints in Christ — this is why we are here. Though we are perplexed by many things — our sin, our sinful

nature, the world, the devil, death — we come to be reassured and gladdened. These things do not win. In Christ, *“the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality.”* *“In Christ shall all be made alive,”* that is, all who belong to Him. And when that last trumpet sounds and the dead are raised, *“then shall come to pass the saying that is written:*

*‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’*

*‘O death, where is your victory?*

*O death, where is your sting?’*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.