

The Death Of John The Baptist

The death of John the Baptist opens to our view an incident filled with all the wickedness, fears and insecurities of the human heart. The conscience-stricken response of Herod Antipas to the mercy and miracles of our Lord Jesus Christ is used by Mark to recount the grizzly death of John, the great prophet and forerunner of our Lord and Saviour.

Who is this Jesus?

Herod was a puppet-king, a vassal of Rome who reigned at the pleasure of the local Roman authorities. Upon hearing of the powerful, miraculous ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, Herod's reaction was to mistake the Lord for John the Baptist 'risen from the dead'. The strangeness of this error takes on dark significance when Mark tells us the circumstances of John's murder and how he was beheaded, at the request of Herod's illegitimate wife, at the climax of a lust filled birthday celebration.

Guilt that gnaws

In truth there was little or nothing to merit Herod's false conclusion. John's ministry and Jesus' ministry were quite different. John did no miracles. The Lord Jesus' did many miracles. John's dress, diet and demeanour was austere. Jesus came eating and drinking as the friend of publicans and sinners. Add to this John was dead because Herod himself had had him killed and it becomes clear that guilt and fear was the real reason for Herod's confusion. What horror hell must hold for the wicked whose guilty conscience is already so haunted in this life.

Sin feeding on sin

No one but the faithful forerunner of the Saviour looks good in this story of vindictiveness and face-saving stupidity. Herod knew better than slay John, but was too weak to lose face amongst his conniving courtiers. Herodias, his illicit wife, filled with spite and seeking vengeance, grasped the opportunity of Herod's drunken swagger to condemn a principled man. Her daughter teased and flaunted herself as a tool to secure the evil end, and bore the head of God's great prophet like a trophy on a plate.

A glorious contrast

But in the end John was dead. He was arrested unjustly, imprisoned without merit, and executed on a whim. Yet let us not pass by without acknowledging the Lord's will in this gruesome death. We do not doubt angels stood by John in his final moments. Hand on sword they would happily have defended their charge and severed the heads of John's killers, smiting with all the vigour and ferocity of an earlier Elijah. But that was not necessary. John's work was done, his ministry was fulfilled, and successful. Now everything before him was glorious. As he departed swiftly the dark cell beneath Herod's castle, he arrived immediately in the bright courts of his God and King; a real King with a real Kingdom. In a final moment of trial he rid himself of the dirt and stench of this sinful world and entered victoriously into everlasting joy.

An enduring witness

The circumstances of John's passing reveal the viciousness of sin and the kindness of Christ. While Herod wished to please the unpleasable, his foolish vanity was but the means of the Lord Jesus Christ promoting His friend and brother, John the Baptist, to heavenly glory. John's disciples came and collected his body for burial but the brave prophet's spirit was already soaring in realms unimaginable to sinful creatures. Herodias looked at the contorted face of John, John looked upon the beautiful face of Christ. We may recoil at the cruelty of Herod and his bitter wife, but John would have it no other way. He had the better part. Soon, in Christ, it shall be ours also.

Our hymns for today are below.

Hymn 1

Gadsby selection 1005

Jesus, the Lamb of God, worshipped. Rev. 5. 11-13

I. Watts

C.M.

1

Come, let us join our cheerful songs
With angels round the throne;
Ten thousand thousand are their tongues,
But all their joys are one.

2

“Worthy the Lamb that died,” they cry,
“To be exalted thus.”
“Worthy the Lamb,” our lips reply,
“For he was slain for us.”

3

Jesus is worthy to receive
Honour and power divine;
And blessings more than we can give,
Be, Lord, for ever thine.

4

Let all that dwell above the sky,
And air, and earth, and seas,
Conspire to lift thy glories high,
And speak thy endless praise.

5

The whole creation join in one,
To bless the sacred name
Of him that sits upon the throne,
And to adore the Lamb.

Hymn 2

Gadsby selection 1104

“Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” Ps. 61. 2

S. Turner or Bennett 11s

1

Convinced as a sinner, to Jesus I come,
Informed by the gospel for such there is room;
O'erwhelmèd with sorrow for sin, will I cry;
“Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I.”

2

O blessèd be Jesus, for answering prayer,
And raising my soul from the pit of despair;
In every new trial, to him will I cry,
“Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I.”

3

When sorely afflicted, and ready to faint,
Before my Redeemer I'll spread my complaint;

'Midst storms and distresses, my soul shall rely
On Jesus, the Rock that is higher than I.