

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

AUGUST 29, 2021

MARK 6: 14-30 THE BEHEADING OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

“THE GREATEST MAN EVER”

Who is the greatest man who has ever lived? Lots of different people will give lots of different answers----maybe a certain philosopher, or artist, or emperor, or general, or president, or scientist..... For we Christians, the answer is obvious: Jesus Christ.

But that leads to an obvious next question----if Christ is the greatest, who's second? Well, in Matthew 11:11, Christ the greatest man ever, tells us who comes in next-----“Surely, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen a man greater than John the Baptist.”

So there's our answer----other than Christ Himself, John the Baptist is the greatest man ever. True, the Holy Theotokos is greater, but when it comes to men, it's John the Baptist. This is all reflected in the large icons at the front of our churches---the first place of honor goes to the icon of Jesus; the second place of honor goes to the Theotokos; the third place of honor goes to the Holy Baptizer.

Today, August 29, is the main holy day of several set aside for St. John. Today we remember his beheading by the wicked King Herod. We just heard the story in our gospel reading from Mark 6.

Today we won't go into that story in this sermon but will look at what things about the Baptist make him so great. 4 things---the first one we can't emulate, so I'll just touch on it. The 2nd, 3rd, & 4th things we can emulate so we'll look at them more closely.

1. The first reason St. John is the greatest man ever is that he is “the forerunner” of the coming of Christ to our world. He by his preaching and baptizing in the Jordan River prepared the people for the Messiah. That we can't really imitate as he has already completed the job 2000 years ago!

2. The second reason St. John is the greatest man ever is his total obedience to God. God gave him an unusual calling---to live in the desert, to survive on a grasshopper diet, to wear camel hair clothes, to bravely stand up

for the truth..... He obeyed 100%.

Here we can follow his example (although it's okay if you pass on eating the bugs!) Whatever God calls us to do, we should, like St. John, give full obedience.

Just "spiritual talk" is not enough. Actual obedience is needed.

Writer Elizabeth Elliot tells about an incident with her little brother, Tom, when he was about 5 years old. He loved to play on the kitchen floor with the pots and pans. One day, their mother gave Tom permission to do so, but strictly ordered that as soon as he was finished, he would put them all away. After a while, the mother came into the kitchen----pots and pans scattered all over the place, but no Tom to be seen. Then she heard the piano and singing from a nearby room. She walked into it to find Elizabeth playing Sunday School songs on the piano and little Tom loudly singing along. The mother chewed Tom out for disobeying and not picking up the kitchen things. Tom argued back and said it was all okay---after all, he was singing "Jesus Loves Me." He got punished---to help him learn that singing Sunday School songs is not a good reason to disobey your mother! ("Comprehensive Bible Study", David C. Cook Publishing, Summer, 1981, pp. 10-11)

Obedience is more important than saying nice religious words. Do we "walk the walk" by always obeying God? Or do we just "talk the talk"?

St. John the Baptist walked the walk.

3. The third reason St. John is the greatest man ever is his great humility. Some thought that he himself was the Messiah. He told them that he was unworthy and that there was a far better man coming---Jesus. Many of his followers ended up leaving to follow Christ---this made John happy, not upset. He was willing to step aside. He felt no need for glory for himself.

Once a long time ago a very holy monk was appointed to be the new abbot for a distant monastery. By himself, he traveled to the far away spot. When the monks saw him approaching, very simply dressed, they assumed he was a new novice they had been waiting for. So they quickly hustled him off to the refectory and told the man he would have to get broken into the monastery by doing dishes and cleaning in the kitchen for quite a while. The new abbot said not a word in protest and didn't try to explain who he really was. He just got busy scrubbing the floor. A few weeks later, the bishop came by to see how the new abbot was doing. What a shock for him to find out the new abbot was washing the plates and cleaning the kitchen floor! (Father Anthony Coniaris, Treasures From Paul's Letters, Vol. 2, p. 143, Light & Life Publishing)

True wisdom is to be truly humble---like that abbot in the kitchen! That's

what St. John was like. St. Isaac of Syria, our great Father from about 1500 years ago, wrote "No one has understanding if he is not humble." (Daily Readings, St. Isaac, Templegate, 1989, p. 65)

4. The fourth reason St. John is so great is his bravery. His bravery led to his execution...and it led to his greatness in the eyes of God and all believers. We heard in today's gospel how King Herod had stolen his brother's wife and married her. John spoke out against this immorality and would not back down. He wouldn't give in to the king, no matter the cost----which ended up being his death.

John lost his head, but gained his soul. He set the example for millions of Christian martyrs in the 2000 years since. Like St. John, they joyously died for Christ. Some of these martyrs are very famous. Some are quite obscure.

An obscure but wonderful one is St. Nicholas of Metsovo in 1617. At that time, Greece was ruled by the Muslim Turks. Nicholas was a simple 20 year old man of Orthodox Christian background. He wasn't really religious at all. He worked in a bakery. The other employees, all Muslims, were always pressuring Nicholas to abandon his Christian heritage and become a Muslim. Very simple to do----just publicly declare faith in Allah and Mohammed. One day Nicholas, just to get them to leave him alone, went ahead and did just that, making his fellow workers very happy. But he soon greatly regretted it. Sure, he hadn't been a strong Christian, but he always had believed in Christ--why should have he turned against Him? So he went to the local priest and confessed his sin and returned to Christ and the Church. His Muslim friends soon found out. They were very upset and turned him into the government. The judge at the trial gave young Nicholas a simple choice. He could once again renounce Christ and again become a Muslim----and he would be set free with no penalty. Or he could insist on staying a Christian and then be burned alive. St. Nicholas chose the fire and went to glory with God that day.

If God could help a young man like that be brave for Him, He can help us, too! So when pressure, perhaps subtle, comes at you, to change what you believe and how you live to please others----don't give in. Stay true to Christ, and to the beliefs and moral teachings of the Church. If public opinion and friends are pushing on you, stand up to them, remembering St. Nicholas of Metsovo. Be brave like him and like St. John the Baptist.

Today is the main day we commemorate St. John the Baptist. Remember him, venerate him.

And follow his example:

---100% holiness, 100% obedience to God.

---Humility; not looking for glory or recognition.

---Bravery: being willing to suffer anything to be true to God, being willing to be different.

Follow the example of St. John the Baptist. And ask that great man to pray for you to be more like him!