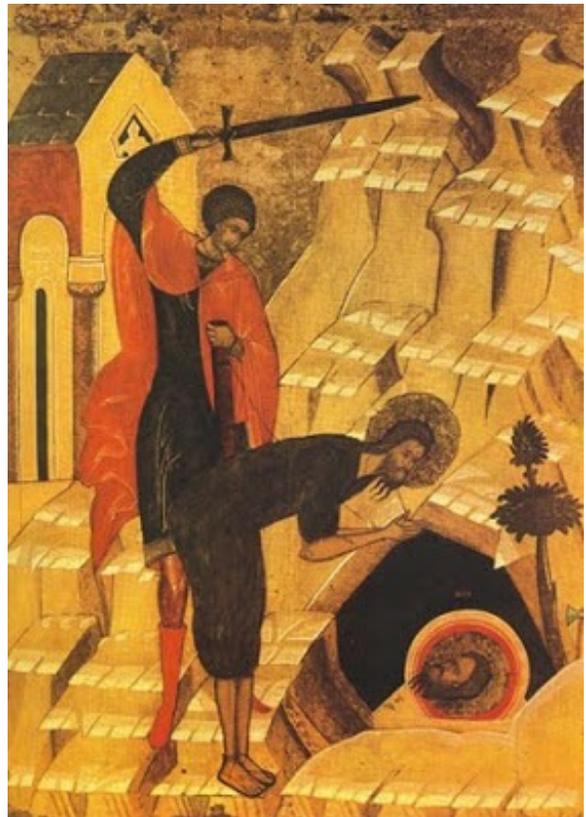


Homily on the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist, Prophet and Forerunner (St. Justin Popovich)

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Homily by St. Justin Popovich on the Feast of the Beheading of Saint John, the Glorious Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord

Today is a little Great Friday, a second Great Friday. For today the greatest man among those born of women, John, the Holy Forerunner and Baptiser of the Lord, is murdered. On Great Friday, people murdered God, crucified God. On today's holy great feast, people murdered the greatest of all men. It is not I who chose to use the expression "the greatest." What are my praises of the great and glorious Forerunner of the Lord, whom the Lord praised more than anyone among men, more than any of the apostles, the Angels, the Prophets, the Righteous Ones, the Sages? For the Lord declared of him: "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.." (Matthew 11: 11). In all Creation, there exists no greater praise.



This is why today is a little Great Friday. Consider: senseless people murder the greatest of the righteous. Is he getting in their way? Yes, he gets between the perverse King Herod and the dissolute Herodias. God's Truth, God's immutable Truth gets in the way of the lawless, gets in the way of poor sinners, gets in the way of everyone stupefied by the various passions. Consider: do not Christ's opponents even today still shout "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!?" Even today, do not those who oppose Christ still demand the head of Jesus of Nazareth? They call for His head, not to mention calling for the head of John the Baptist.

What is this? Could it be that this world has become a madhouse? People do not want God, they do not want the greatest Righteous One in the whole world. Whom do you want? Whom would you prefer? Whom would you set in Christ's stead? With whom would you replace St. John the Baptist? With yourselves?! O moth! O, tiny mortal insects! Yes, when people become maddened by pride, when out of egotistical pride they lose their reason, they have no need of God, they have no need of God's Truth. They declare themselves to be

gods. They present their petty, shallow, false likeness of truth as the great and salvific Truth. They declare their shallow, earthly, perishable images of truth to be the greatest of truths: they posit that we do not need Christ's Truth, that we do not want God's Truth. Yes, people blind in intellect and spirit do not see, and do not want to see, that man, true man, cannot manage without God. Why? Because this world is full of Herods, full of Pharisees. Herod demands the head of John the Baptist, Herod demands the heads of all of the righteous of the world, and Pharisees, the lying scribes, lying sophists of this world, demand the death of Christ, the Incarnate God.

Yes, today's Feast is a second Great Friday. Why? Because there is no greater transgression than that committed on Great Friday and that committed now, when Herod destroys the greatest among those born of women. Why did the Savior exalt the great Saint John the Baptist, as He did no one else? Why? Because, brethren, the Holy Forerunner encompassed within himself, within his person, all of the virtues of Heaven, all of the virtues in all of the Prophets, all of the Apostles, all of the Martyrs, all of the Angels of Heaven, all of the Confessors. Regard: today we glorify the destruction, the beheading of the first Apostle among the Holy Apostles, for the Forerunner of the Lord was the first sent by God to see and to herald to the world the Savior of the world. Long before the Apostle Peter, before the Apostle Nathaniel, before anyone else, he bore witness to and announced God to the world, God Incarnate in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The first Apostle to see the Holy Spirit descending from Heaven onto the Lord Jesus, when he baptized Him in the Jordan, announces Him to be the Son of God, the Savior of the world. [John] is also the first Evangelist among the Evangelists. He first announced to the world, and pointed out, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Bearer of all Good News for mankind.

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the Good News of Heaven and earth, God's Gospel for men in this world. "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." In those few words, the Holy Forerunner expressed the fullness of the Gospels.

Looking toward the East, he said to the entire human race, from Adam to our days, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The Kingdom of Heaven? Here it is: the Lord Jesus [come] from Heaven. In Him is the Kingdom of Heaven. Looking toward the West, and seeing people drowning in sins and death, he called to them as well, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." He looked to the North and to the South [and saw] – the same people, all slaves to sin, slaves to death, slaves to the devil. To all he announced the glorious, holy and salvific Gospel, "People, repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." He was such an Evangelist, someone possessed of great power!

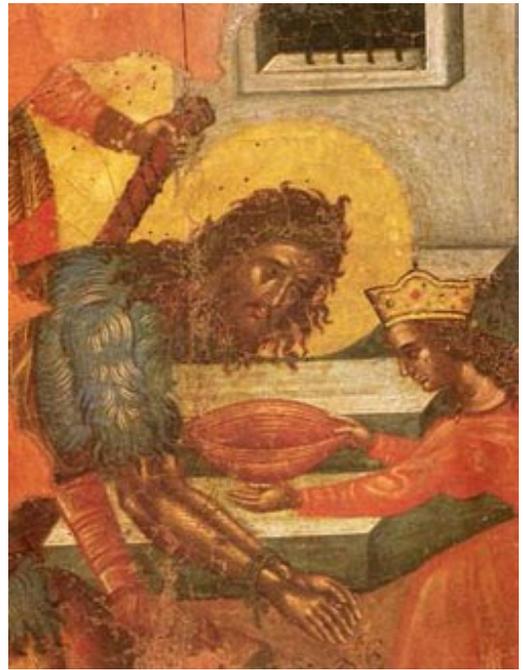
When the Lord set out to preach His Gospel, to preach with power, He took those words as the beginning and end of His Gospel. From that moment, Jesus began to preach and to declare, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand (Matthew 4:17). This is why the Holy Forerunner is the first Evangelist among Christ's Evangelists.

Today, people have come into contact with an Angel in the flesh, an earthly Angel, and a Heavenly person, St. John the Baptist. It was not only the Old Testament prophet who called the Forerunner the Angel of the Lord, but the Lord Himself said this was an Angel sent to go before Him to prepare the way for Him. (Isaiah 40: 3; Matthew 11: 10). Not only a prophet, said the Lord regarding the Baptist, but greater than a prophet – the Angel of the Lord. And people do not want him, and people drive him from this world! Thus, the Holy Forerunner is truly the first Angel in the flesh, the first among those who became the multitude of Angels in the flesh, lamps bringing God's Light, who lived on earth like Angels of Heaven, and were Angels on earth, and in Heaven remained God's people, holy people.

Today we glorify the great feast of the first among the Prophets of the New Testament. He announced to men that the Lord Jesus Christ had appeared to the world not only as the Savior, but as the Enlightener and as the Judge of the world. In his hands were both the hatchet and the spade: on the day of the Dread Judgement, the Lord would clean off the earth's threshing-floor, and would separate the wheat from the chaff, the righteous from the sinners. All of this the great and glorious Prophet, Forerunner and Baptizer of the Lord had foreseen. Therefore, today we also praise him as the holy New Testament Prophet, killed by the impious, criminal, King Herod.

The Holy Forerunner also received the Lord's witness to the fact that he was the greatest of those born of woman, because he had become the first of all of the Holy Martyrs of the New Testament. See how he suffered for God's truth in this world! He suffered joyously! In today's principal hymn and prayer to him it is said that he went to his death rejoicing, and that he suffered rejoicing. Thus, he became the first example and inspiration to all of the Holy Martyrs of the New Testament, beginning with St. Stephen the Protomartyr and through today. All of the Holy Martyrs go to their death rejoicing in the Lord Jesus Christ, go to their deaths, knowing that death cannot hold them in its bonds, knowing that death is merely a gate, an open gate through which their holy souls enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. How else, brothers and sisters, can we explain the joy of Holy Great Martyr George's joy while having his body broken: his bones were being broken on the wheel, and he shouted with joy in the Lord, for he could see Him, could see the Angels of God, standing around Him, and the Angels stopping the wheel. See what joy [he experienced] during those awful tortures! And the Holy Great Martyr stands up whole and unharmed before the godless Emperor Diocletian. The first one to reveal that holy joy of martyrdom had been St. John, the Holy Forerunner and Baptizer of the Lord.

Today we also specifically glorify the first Evangelist and Christian Confessor, the first to Confess God in this New Testament world. Consider how fearlessly, openly and directly he confessed God's Truth: O King, it is not right for you to have your brother's wife, your living brother's wife. You have taken your brother's wife away from him. All of the laws of Heaven and earth are against you, and I, I recite these laws of Heaven and earth to you, for it was to do so that I was sent. O King, you cannot have your brother's wife. Fearless and uncowable, like an immortal lion, like one of the Cherubim in the flesh, he was the first Confessor of Christ's Faith, and he has been followed by multitudes of faces – the world's glorious Confessors of Christ's Faith, Confessors who bear witness and confess before



the entire world, before East and West, before North and South, that the Lord Christ is the Sole True God in Heaven and on earth. And this they, countless multitudes of fearless and uncowable all-conquerors, beginning with the Holy Forerunner and continuing through the present day, do despite all of the persecution, despite all of the lies of those who strive to rise up against Christ in this world, despite all the heresies, all of the theomachists, and all of the persecutors of Christ. They bear witness to, and announce to all the world, this Truth: Christ is before all and above all! He is the Sole True God. You, false gods, masks, vile and repulsive masks of false gods, begone! True God is essential to the human soul in this earthly realm. Who are you self-proclaimed ones? Who? In the graves, in thousands of nets you cast yourselves, and you want to supplant the Lord Christ? How lowly, how impoverished you are! Alas, all of Hell laughs at nothing more than it laughs at you. The demons laugh out loud at you, and you do not hear them; yet we Christians – we hear them.

Yes, the Holy Baptist, was the first Christian Confessor, and there streamed after him, following as after a helmsman, thousands and thousands of glorious Confessors of Christ in this world.

My brethren, a great Mystery is taking place through this Feast, a Mystery like unto threads stretching through and making up a piece of cloth. In today's Gospel reading, you heard the disciples announce to the Savior that the Forerunner has been beheaded. The mouth that announced You to the world has fallen silent, O Lord! What now? Who are we in comparison to Your great Baptist? The Savior is silent. Then something unusual happens. He calls His disciples together, and with them, He goes out to a place in the desert. What is this? Can it be that the Lord is running away, can it be that he is fleeing from Herod? Consider: He, the All-merciful Miracle Worker, looks upon the unfortunate widowed mother, and resurrects

her son, someone unknown to anyone but the mother and Himself. Yet here, Lord, Your Forerunner lies dead, destroyed. Why don't You resurrect him? You resurrected the daughter of Jairus, head of the synagogue. Yet here is the one whom You called the greatest among those born of women, beheaded by the malefactor- king. Lord, guard Your Truth, defend Your first Apostle, Your first Martyr, Your first Evangelist, Your first Angel in the flesh, Your first Prophet, Your first Confessor. Resurrect him! Yet the Savior remains silent, and retreats to a desert place to pray to God. Why, O Lord?

Because the Holy Forerunner must also become the first Apostle to Hades, to death's kingdom - to which had departed the souls of all people from Adam to the time of the coming of the Savior into this world. In that kingdom of death called Hades, i.e. the impenetrable place, where no one can see anything, in that kingdom was to be found everyone: the righteous and the sinners, all of the people of the Old Testament, up to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sin had brought death into the earthly realm, into the world of men, and the kingdom of death became the sole abode for human souls in this world. The Forerunner had to become the Forerunner in Hades as well, in death's kingdom, so that he might preach there as well to the souls of all human beings: Lo, the One whom you have been awaiting, Whom all you Righteous Ones: Moses, Abraham, David, all of the Holy Prophets and Righteous Ones, have been thirsting to see, has come to earth. Lo, He has come to earth as a man, as the Savior, and he is working such signs and wonders as you, all of you taken together, have never seen. His glance heals people of all diseases, His word resurrects everyone from death, His voice drives demons out of those possessed. Truly the Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ has come to earth. And lo, I go before Him to preach to you as well this best of news: He will come down here to us as well. In a little while He will come down, and you will see Him. You will be able to see what kind of human soul He has, One filled with God and shining with infinite light.

The Holy Forerunner appeared death's kingdom as the first Evangelist, in order to preach the Good News of Christ to all of the souls in the kingdom of death. He appeared as well to all of them as the first Martyr, to show that people will joyously go to their deaths for True God, the Lord Jesus Christ, Savior of the world, until death is defeated and destroyed. They will not fear death, for they will be more powerful than death. Through his bodily Resurrection, the Lord grants the body victory over death. The glorious Forerunner also entered into the kingdom of death as the Forerunner of all of the true Confessors of Christ in the world, all of the true Prophets in the world, to announce to all of the souls in the kingdom of death: Lo, death is defeated, the demons destroyed, the kingdom of death will be destroyed when, in a little while, the Lord appears here, and you will be led out of this horror and into heavenly joy, into the Kingdom On High.

This was why the Lord remained silent, why he did not resurrect the greatest man among those born of women, for that man was to complete his apostolic, evangelistic, martyric, confessor's spiritual struggle in Hades, in the kingdom of death.

And so, today for us Christians is like unto Great Friday. Just as, for the Savior, after Great Friday, the Resurrection approaches, so the Forerunner joyously dies and enters into death, for he sees the victory over death and knows that the Lord has prepared for him as well eternal life and resurrection from the dead on the day of the Great Judgment.

When the Lord was crucified, He descended into the nether regions, into Hades, into the kingdom of death, with His human Soul. His Body lay in the tomb, but His Soul, the fullness of his Divinity, descended into death's kingdom. And how astonished must have been all of the human souls in Hades, on seeing God in a human soul, shining with ineffable light, light impossible for a human being to imagine. Who would not come to believe in Him? Who? When He appears in the kingdom of death so filled with Eternal Truth, Eternal Life, Eternal Justice. He appears as conqueror over death. And as death's kingdom could not hold God, Who was in Jesus' soul, could not hold God in its hands, it fell apart because of Christ's Divinity, because of His Most-holy Soul, in which was the fullness of God. And the Lord led out of death's kingdom all those who had earlier come to believe the Forerunner, and those who had come to believe in Him, the Lord Jesus Christ, to believe that in truth, He was True God in Heaven and on earth.

The Lord led them out, and led them into the Kingdom of Heaven. This is why the Lord Jesus Christ did not resurrect St. John the Forerunner and Baptizer of Jesus.

Today, in glorifying that great and glorious first Apostle, first Martyr, first Evangelist, Precursor to all true Christians of all time, we bow down before his joyous suffering for Christ's Truth and His Holy Gospel, before him as Apostle and Martyr. Consider, already for 2,000 years, the One who allowed the lawless king to behead him, has been working countless miracles in the earthly realm, living in it alongside the Lord Jesus Christ. For 2000 years, he has been ceaselessly working miracles for all those who turn to him in prayer.

Brothers and sisters, whenever you are in great sorrow, turn to that first Apostle of Christ, and he will help you with all of your burdens. And should some kind of misfortune happen, turn to that first Evangelist. No matter what bitterness might fill your soul, he will sweeten it with Christ's grace, which he will mystically send down to your tortured soul from the World on High. And when you find yourself in temptations and horrors of this earthly life, run to him, to the Holy Confessor; tell him what is in your heart, pour out your sorrows and spiritual needs and rest assured that in a mystical, divine manner, he will come down into your soul and will save you, and will deliver you from all temptations and woes. But should need to suffer for the Lord Jesus Christ in this world: should others attack you on all sides, should atheists and those who oppose Christ want to swallow you up, to destroy you for belonging to Christ, want to silence your voice, to stop it from speaking of Christ, then remember that first Martyr, and call out to him: O Holy Martyr, first Martyr of Christ in the Gospels, hurry to my aid! Grant that may I die for the Lord Jesus Christ, leave my body like temporary clothing, and by the path of the Holy Martyrs move to Christ's Kingdom! He will

entreat the Lord that you might also join the host of Luminaries. Thus, today's little Great Friday becomes for us the great joy of the Resurrection. Friday is small, but Sunday, the Resurrection, is great – resurrection for all Christians of all time. And for us today: for me, for you, for every Christian living today, today's Great Friday is at the same time the Resurrection, for today we glorify the St. John the Baptist who is eternally alive in the Heavens; [we glorify] his victory over the death appointed to him by Herod, his soaring up into the Heavenly Realm, to be the first after the Mother of God, to stand beside the Lord Jesus Christ. You have seen the icon known as the "Deisis" i.e. "Prayer" Icon. In it, the Lord sits on the Throne of Glory, as King of Heaven. On His right is the Most-holy Mother of God, and on His left, the Holy Forerunner. They pray to Him for the human race.

Oh, may his holy prayers be raised up today and tomorrow, and always, and may they be raised up for us Christians-Serbs, and for all the people on this earth, that the Lord lead all to repentance, that He have mercy upon all, that He save all, that all people, brought [to Him] by the glorious Forerunner, might forever glorify the One True God in Heaven and on earth, the Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom is due all honor and glory, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.