

Birthdays are for celebrating, right? But in the Bible, birthdays mean that people die. When Pharaoh celebrated his birthday in Egypt, the chief cupbearer was restored to his position, but the chief baker, as Joseph said would happen, had his head lifted up – from him – on a tree. When Herod celebrated his birthday in our text, John the Baptist lost his head. And thirty years prior to this, after Jesus' birth, Herod's father, Herod the Great, slew all the male children in Bethlehem two years old and younger.

There are some birthdays which never should have taken place. Jesus tells us it would have been better for Judas Iscariot had he never been born. I'm sure the parents of those baby boys in Bethlehem wished that King Herod had never been born. And if he had never been born, his sons, Philip and Herod (the one in our text) would not have been born. Nor would have Herodias, the evil genius who plotted against John the Baptist. She was the granddaughter of Herod the Great. Yep, she married her Uncle Philip, then divorced him to marry her Uncle Herod. Talk about a messed up family.

But not only was the Herod clan messed up, they messed up everyone around them, including John. What was his crime? Preaching the Word of God faithfully. And for this he loses his head. Why couldn't Herodias have simply done what people do today? Avoid the preacher. Ignore him, but let him keep his head. At least here in this part of the world.

But there is something in the story of John's beheading which is actually profoundly great. John's disciples come, we're told, and bury his body. Minus his head of course. But not really. Because look at He to whom John pointed. He who continued to preach after John no longer could. He who would, like John, be put to death, and when people were celebrating the birthday of the Passover. Jesus was John's true head. And no evil woman, no axe, could ever sever Jesus from John. Nor from you.

I'm sure you are quite fond of the head on your shoulders. But you have an even greater head. "*(Jesus) is the head of the body, the church,*" we're told in Colossians 1. You are that body. In baptism you became a member of the church of which Jesus is the head. This means that no matter what happens to the head on your shoulders, you always have Jesus as your true head.

I doubt very much that you will lose your head like John did. But your head may become disorientated. Dementia, Alzheimer's, who knows what? Yet even if your head succumbs to these, Jesus remains your true head. And nothing can sever Him from you. Not sleep, not a coma, not even the sleep of death. Your baptism declares that you are, and always are, the body of Christ. And so, Jesus is your head now and forever.

Now, there is no Herodias after you. No evil plot to remove your head from your body. Except that you and I have the evil tendency to plot against ourselves. We tend toward sin. We gravitate toward it. And sin is, in truth, the body plotting to remove its own head who is Jesus.

Think about this. We don't need Herodias because we do a good job of beheading ourselves. We throw off Jesus from ourselves. We say Yes to sin, and in doing this we say No to Jesus. And not just on our birthday. This is a daily thing with us.

Yet even though we, time and again, sever ourselves from Jesus, He never severs Himself from you. He is not just your head when you are living a life pleasing to Him. He is your head also when you disobey Him.

Remember that upon His head was fixed a crown of thorns. He was lifted up on a tree, and He suffered the pain of hell itself. He suffered, in other words, the agony of being severed from His head, His Heavenly Father. He did this for you. He knows that pain, and He will not let that happen to you. He took your sins, your rejections of Him, your evil plots, and He died to forgive them all. You are forgiven, my friend. Jesus assures you of this truth. He is your forgiving head.

When I was a boy, my dad was given a chicken for eating. I watched as he chopped off its head. And then, to my amazement, he let go of the chicken's body and it ran all around the yard as if it was looking for its head.

That was you. But then Jesus grasped you in Holy Baptism and brought you into Himself becoming your head. And you do not need to go running around anymore looking for your head. You are where you need to be. You are in Christ. He covers you. He completes you. He forgives you. Amen.