

- Some of you may know that today, August 29<sup>th</sup>, is traditionally the Feast of the Beheading of John the Baptist. Of course, we all know this story of how the saintly prophet was killed because of the petty jealousy of a sinful woman. It was an incredible injustice.
- John the Baptist was a truth-teller. And because he was willing to call out those living in sin, he was unjustly imprisoned and executed. Power and authority were abused, and an innocent and holy man suffered and was beheaded because of that.
- Before I was a priest, I worked for several years in the refugee resettlement world, where I was exposed daily to those who suffered injustices, and who were subject to the abuses of power and authority by others.
- Yet it was good and fulfilling work, because it revolved around performing corporal works of mercy as a means of softening the blows of injustice.
- It was fascinating work in that I constantly met with people from all around the world, but also painful work in that I was privy to the sad stories of those who had lost livelihoods and loved ones, and who had to figure out a way to start life over again in a new country because they had been unjustly persecuted. It was work that left a mark on my mind and heart.
- So, whenever there's a humanitarian crisis in our world that is bound to produce more refugees, I pay attention – and I pray, for the wars, insurrections, and persecutions that produce refugees create suffering that is hard for most Americans to imagine.
- Speaking of which, I'm sure many of us have been watching the evacuation of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, and the desperation of so many Afghan nationals seeking to flee their own country now that the Taliban is in control.
- We can only imagine the chaos at the airport in Kabul, as well as the fear and hopelessness being experienced by those trying to escape from a country that, once again, will be ruled by terrorists. Those who manage to become refugees will be the lucky ones.
- As I watch the images on television and read the stories in the newspaper, it becomes so evident to me that, if we don't keep our hearts and minds fixed on Heaven, we can run the risk of becoming either cynical or despondent as we witness "man's inhumanity to man."
- Justice between men is a precarious and precious thing. Because of our sinfulness, justice is so easily abused and lost. And sometimes when we suffer an injustice, it simply cannot be restored or remedied; rather, it just has to be endured.
- That's why seeking the Kingdom of God must be on the forefront of our minds, because we will never really experience the fullness of peace and tranquility in this life, but only in the next. In this life we will always have struggles and strife – and we must be prepared for that.
- So how do we seek the Kingdom of God in this life?
- It begins by striving to obey or Lord's laws and commandments. God has given us His laws and commandments not only to ensure justice between men, but also to help us become more like Him.
- Following God's laws makes us holier people, because they direct our behavior in accord with God's will. God's laws order our lives properly. This is why Moses is so insistent in our first reading that the Israelites should observe the commandments.
- God's laws are wise and just, they help produce within us the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and prevent us from following the ways of the flesh. If all men would follow God's laws, then we wouldn't have the grave injustices we so often see committed in our world.

- But being obedient to the commandments, and asking for forgiveness for the times we break them is just the beginning. To seek the Kingdom of God in this life also requires that we strive to practice works of mercy.
- As the Apostle James tells us today, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”
- In other words, we have to be willing to serve others and care for their needs. For as we know from the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, when we care for the needs of others, it is Christ for whom we are caring.
- But even beyond this, if we truly are to seek the Kingdom of God in this life, then we absolutely have to be committed to our Lord rather than the world. We cannot serve two masters.
- In our Gospel today Jesus calls out the scribes and Pharisees for their lack of integrity. While they had the appearance of serving God by their exacting observance of their rituals, while they honored God with their lips, their hearts were far from God. They were hypocrites.
- More concerned with exercising control over the masses, the hearts of so many of the scribes and Pharisees were filled with malice, deceit, and arrogance, rather than a true love and respect for the Lord.
- They weren’t seeking the Kingdom of God because they were serving another master: their own pride and vanity.
- So our Gospel today begs the question: who or what are we serving in this life? Who or what captures our heart and mind? Are we honestly seeking the Kingdom of God, or are we seeking only to be happy in this life?
- Brothers and sisters, we can never count on happiness and peace in this life. Nor can we count on justice. Our life circumstances can change at a moment’s notice, and we can be plunged quickly into a world of suffering.
- But if we spend our earthly lives earnestly seeking the Kingdom of Heaven, then we can be assured that God’s providence will take care of our needs, and that we will grow in that righteousness that prepares us to meet our Lord.
- May we do our best to love, honor, and obey God; may we bear our sufferings and injustices with patience and fortitude. And we always have the courage to say and do what is right, even if it literally cost us our heads.
- St. John the Baptist, pray for us.