

FEBRUARY 7, 2025 FATHER MICHAEL COUTTS

After that long reading of the gospel, I wonder how many of us can remember our first reading from the Hebrews. The first reading from the Hebrews has a mixed bag of ethical injunctions. Hospitality, compassion, and sympathy, fidelity in marriage, and the sanctity in marriage, and most especially, to avoid against greed, greed for money. Jesus has spoken in the gospel so very often of so many temptations, but he hasn't spoken as much of money... as of any others. He speaks more about greed and the downfall of human beings because of greed. So, what should we do about it? Hebrews gives us the answer. Hebrews tells us quite frankly that if we have faith in Jesus Christ, and with prayer, we will be able to be people of hospitality, and we will be able to be people of sympathy and compassion for those who fall. And the reason for this is very simple. We, ourselves, are fragile. We, ourselves, are frail. We, ourselves, fall, and we commit sin. Not only once, but several times. "So we should not be discouraged," the letter to the Hebrews says to a church that is not known and unnamed. "You have elders within this faith community, who give you a good example. Follow their example. Imitate them. And be faithful."

But Hebrews also warns us, that if we follow the example of the elders, if we live good lives of integrity, there are side effects. And the side effects are people who do not live according to this will scorn you, will pour shame on you, will try to trip and trap you so that you may fall down and become just like one of them. But hold firm, because you have these elders. They have set a pattern and you can live lives of integrity. But be sure that if you have lives of integrity, you will be persecuted. You will even be put to death. And we see that as a perfect example in the gospel today. It is too long a gospel to comment on the whole lot of it, so I'll just comment on the three main characters. One is John the

Baptist. John the Baptist lived a life of integrity and courage. He spoke out against things that were wrong. Now, there are a lot of things wrong in this world, and, unless we are people of integrity, it is very difficult for us to speak about these things that are wrong. But if we are in authority, like bishops, and, you know, a pastor of a parish. If he sees something wrong, he is bound as a pastor, as a shepherd, to call these out. But we go beyond our authority if we tend to be judge, jury, and executioner. If we say, "Because you do the sin, no sacraments for you." "No," because as Jesus said, "I haven't come for those who are righteous. I come for sinners."

If anybody needs the sacrament, it's precisely those who are at fault and who have committed the sin and need to come back to the gospel. And this is exactly what John did. John did not speak about all the sins that people did, but Herod was a public figure. He took the wife of his brother, Philip, and therefore, John would admonish him in front of everybody, because he gave a bad example. Today, leaders who have divorced two, three, four times, hardly even cause us to blink an eyelid. I remember when I was a kid, when there was a divorce in the royal family, we were shocked. "How could this happen?" "How could you allow such a person to be the leading in the count-- leading a country?" But, today, we don't even pay a second thought to them.

The second person I'd like to speak about is the person of Herod, himself, a very ambiguous character. On one hand, he has done something wrong, but on the other hand, he respects John for his courage and integrity, and he's fearful of doing something that will harm him, and therefore, he's protecting him against Herodias. But, John-- But, Herod is a man who is a vacillating character who keeps on changing things when it suits him, and he is given so much in to human respect. And, therefore, when the third character I'd like to speak about,

Salome, comes and dances... Salome is not named in the gospel today, but legend says that she was the daughter of Herodias. And she's made quite famous by the Irish poet Oscar Wilde, who's written a play, practically, on the Dance of the Seven Veils. And since then, librettos and oratorios have been written about this famous dance. But here she is, who comes and dances, and she goes to her mother and asks her, "What should I ask for?" But she is not, let us say, "guiltless herself," because she just does what the mother said. She goes back and she adds her own thing. "I want it now and I want it on a platter." And Saint Ignatius of Loyola tells us that whenever we have to make decisions of this type, like Herod had to do, when we are moved by emotions, we should not make a decision. We should weigh the pros and cons. We should discern, and only then, make a decision as to what is right and what is wrong. If Herod had only looked at it and said, "Look. "You're going far beyond. "Okay, I've promised you half the kingdom, "but this is beyond half the kingdom. "This is the life of human being. "We don't dilly-dally with this."

And so, we call to mind these three characters, John, Herod, and Salome. We look at them and see how they are reflected in our own life. When we turn away from sin, we are faithful to the gospel. God bless you, all.