

AUGUST 29, 2025, FATHER MICHAEL COUTTS

Our feast today is called the Passion of John the Baptist. The word passion can be taken in two different senses. The word passion could mean pain, suffering, and death. But the word passion could also mean a fire in a heart—a heart determined to focus on the truth for a cause, for a principle. And in the case of John the Baptist, the word passion referred to, in both cases, his own suffering and death, and his own heart on fire.

The word martyr is used for any person or any people who lose their lives because of their faith. And so we have martyrs—not only Christians but Hindus, Muslims, and even Buddhist monks. They are killed solely because they are Hindus, they are Sunnis, they are Shiites, they are Buddhist monks. They are killed for their faith.

But we also know people who have been killed, or at least are willing to die, for a principle. Who can forget the 5th of June in 1989, when the “tank man,” a single consumer with two shopping bags, stood before the tanks in China in Tiananmen Square? Nobody knows exactly whether he was killed or not—it is still a mystery—but he was standing for a principle. He was full of passion.

But there is another reason why people die, and that is because of the ego and self-centeredness of the person, of a leader, of a ruler, of a country. That has happened all the way back to the time of Jesus himself, when people preferred felons and murderers to an innocent man—not this man, Jesus, but Barabbas. And we all hear that subtitle, and Barabbas was a murderer.

We see that happening all over the world in different countries, where people storm presidential palaces and capitals just because they are not pleased with what is in charge or who is in charge. We have seen so many places in Africa happening like that. And even in our own country of Canada, where our leaders decided we don’t want these things and

people protest, and we had the convoy in Ottawa that pretty well shut down our capital. The egos and self-centeredness of certain people can cause total destruction.

We see that in our Gospel today. John the Baptist was unique in the sense that, unlike other prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Ezekiel, they were the people who didn't want to be prophets at all. Why? Because prophets were killed, prophets were sent into exile, prophets were beaten, prophets were thrown in prison. But John the Baptist was unique in the sense that he was chosen to be the messenger of the Lord even before he was born.

We hear that in the prophecy of his father, Zechariah: "And you, my child, shall go before the Lord to prepare the way of the Lord." Even while he was in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit came down on him, and Elizabeth would say to Mary, "Who am I to receive the mother of the Lord? For even as I heard your voice, the child in my womb leapt for joy." John the Baptist was chosen even before he was born, and he did not shrink from this task.

We could see that because Jesus himself would give that unique praise to John the Baptist: "Of all the people that are born"—which means everybody—"there is nobody greater than John the Baptist." Why did Jesus give this praise to this man whose passion we celebrate today? He gave this praise precisely because of that passion.

John the Baptist knew his role: I am not the Messiah. I have just come to prepare the way of the Lord. This is what he told the scribes and the Pharisees when they asked him, "Who are you and who has sent you?" John the Baptist was known for his humility because he says, "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals." John the Baptist was known for his fidelity, that no matter how many times he was challenged, he remained faithful to the fact that he was there to prepare the way of the Lord. What a beautiful task indeed.

If you look at John the Baptist in his own life, from the very moment that he was born and then later on when he went out into the desert, clothed in camel skin and with a belt around his waist, living a life that was simple—he did not care about what the other people thought. And he spoke freely and without fear. He spoke to the Roman soldiers, he spoke to the common people, he spoke to the scribes and Pharisees, and even King Herod was fascinated by what he said.

What was the reaction? As I said earlier, the people would stone the prophets, but when it came to John the Baptist, they actually listened to him and even asked him, “What should we do?” There was something unique about John the Baptist, and that was because he came to proclaim the word of the Lord.

In 2012, Pope Benedict at that time spoke about the Year of Faith, and he said that each one of us had been baptized priest, prophet, and king, and we have to, like John the Baptist, proclaim the faith. And how are we going to do that? We just cannot wing it.

He spoke to us about the things that we do when we ordain a priest. The bishop hands him the Scriptures and says: “Believe what you read, preach what you believe, practice what you preach.” And so as we go out to proclaim, like John the Baptist, that Jesus is the Lord, we follow these simple rules and instructions.

It is not left for priests and bishops to do it, but for everybody who has been baptized—because each one of us has been baptized and anointed as priest, prophet, and king.

God bless you all.