

3 August 2024 -- Saturday of the 17th week 'B

[Jer 26:11-16. 24; Matt 14, 1-12](#)

Homily

This Gospel presents us with two men who are very different from each other. The first, John the Baptist, is a free man, without power or ambition, and therefore also without fear. The other is a man with a great deal of power in his hands, enslaved by his calculations and ambitions, and because of that constantly torn by fear.

John is a free man. His mission is to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. He exists solely for that purpose and has no other ambition. When he recognised the Messiah, he sent his own disciples to him, saying: 'This is the Lamb of God'. He peacefully acknowledges that the time has come for him to disappear. With no ambition, nothing to lose and nothing to gain, he is supremely free. He can speak firmly to great and small alike. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees 'brood of vipers' and reminded King Herod that he was not allowed to live with his brother's wife. It would cost him his life; but, as a free man, he was not afraid of death.

Herod is the type par excellence of the man who is constantly tormented, because he is not free, because he is torn by his desires and ambitions. So he is constantly in anguish. The Evangelist Mark (6:20) tells us that Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and that he protected him; and that when he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and it was with pleasure that he listened to him. But he still had him put in prison because he reproached him for his conduct. On his birthday, when he had made a crazy promise to Herodias' daughter and she asked for John's head, he was torn between several fears. He was afraid of killing John, but he was also afraid of losing face in front of his guests. So he has John beheaded. And then, when he hears the miracles performed by Jesus, he is afraid and tells himself that it is John who has come back from the dead. During Jesus' trial, he was afraid to put him to death, but he handed him over to the Jews anyway, for fear of being considered an enemy of Caesar.

One of the admonitions that keeps coming back from Jesus, especially in the scenes following the Resurrection, is: 'Do not be afraid'. Peter, who had begun to walk on water, began to sink just as he became afraid.

Where does fear come from? It comes from the prospect of losing something that is very important to us. Those who possess great wealth

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are easily frightened of losing it. Those who are attached to their name or reputation are afraid of losing it. Those with great ambitions are afraid of anything that might stand in the way of achieving them. On the other hand, the poor person, with no property and no power, who has nothing to lose, is much more easily fearless. They are much more likely to be free.

Blessed are the poor. Yes, blessed are the poor with free hearts who, like John the Baptist, from the very first Christian generation, were never afraid to lay down their lives in fidelity to the Gospel.