

Pentecost 7 / July 11, 2021

Mark 6:29

“When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.”

A Prophet's Reward

Do you ever feel unappreciated? Do you ever feel your service isn't acknowledged or adequately rewarded? We might not express such feelings verbally, but we may feel them in our hearts, particularly when someone else's efforts are lauded and their service, rewarded. If you ever feel that way, know that you are not alone. Peter complained to Jesus on behalf of himself and his fellow disciples saying, *“Lord we have left everything to follow you!”* Then he asked, *“What will there be for us?”* They are famous now, but they were all long dead when people started naming churches and cities after them, writing and selling books about them. They never reaped any earthly reward for their fame. All of them suffered and almost all of them died gruesome deaths.

John the baptizer could have asked the same question, as he languished in prison. The end of his life was a stark contrast to his earlier life and especially his prophetic ministry. Jesus said of John, *“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John the baptizer.”* What was John's reward? It appeared John's reward was the executioner's sword; as it would also be for Peter and the other apostles. In the context of the sad and gruesome end to which John came, he didn't receive a reward of any earthly value for his greatness, nothing commensurate with his service to the Lord! It even seems he was denied the favour of God, who did not intervene to rescue him from prison or to save him from death. Not much of a reward for a faithful servant!

Yet, John's reward was not death, the manner of his death, nor the unseemly circumstances that surrounded it. John's reward was to serve God as His prophet, announce Jesus as the Christ and lead people to Him as Saviour. John was blessed to prepare the way for the Lord's Christ and to return the hearts of the children to the faith of their fathers. John was blessed to publicly identify Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, *“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* He baptized Jesus. He saw the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descend in the form of a dove. He heard the divine voice declare Jesus, His beloved Son. No earthly suffering could take away, or in any way diminish those blessings. Most importantly, John was blessed to hold Jesus in his heart as Saviour and to confess faith in Him, even in the face of an unjust imprisonment and death. God calls all of us to share in that blessing by holding Jesus in our hearts as Saviour and confessing Him as Lord.

John was the last prophet of the Old Testament. He embodied the prophetic ministry and expressed it's message. As the pinnacle of the prophetic ministry, he received a prophet's reward. Not much of a reward from a worldly point of view! Imprisonment and execution at the request of a king's angry wife and her dancing daughter. Not much of a reward from a worldly perspective, but it was a reward in keeping with the prophetic tradition. Elijah was taken up in a fiery chariot, but he was the exception to the rule. Most prophets came to a violent end. According to rabbinic tradition Isaiah was sawn in two. The prophet Jeremiah survived the siege of Jerusalem and the hatred of the royal officials, only to be taken by force into exile in Egypt, where he died. John was the last prophet of the Old Covenant and so he died a prophet's death. His death prefigured the death of Christ and the death of all the apostles, all of whom suffered violent deaths, save for John the evangelist who alone died in old age on his own bed.

John is a symbol of the church in the world, struggling with sin within, attacked from the outside by the devil and the world, living in the shadow of death. His suffering and death bears witness that God preserves the church in suffering and death. In Romans, Paul said, *“nothing not even death will separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”* In Revelation, Jesus says, *“Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.”* We all must suffer many things before we enter fully into the kingdom of God. Christ does not promise us lives free from suffering and death. He promises to be with us in our pain and to sustain our faith in the face of death. John died a prophet's death. Suffering and death come with the territory, but they are not the reward, the kingdom of God is our reward in time and for eternity. The reward is not earned by our suffering. Jesus earned the reward through His suffering and death on the cross. Jesus joins us in our suffering, so that we may remain faithful unto death. He is our reward in time and for eternity.

Everyone has times in which they feel hard done by, unappreciated and scorned. Jeremiah lamented that he was born to suffer mockery and contempt as a prophet. He asked, “*Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and to spend my days in shame?*” As he languished in prison by the Dead Sea, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “*Are you the one who is to come or should we expect another?*” God did not cast Jeremiah aside in his discouragement. He upheld him with His word and by His Spirit. Jesus did not disparage John or call out his faltering faith. Instead, He told his disciples to encourage him, to tell him that in accordance with the words of the prophets “*the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news preached to them.*”

Jesus doesn’t cast us off, condemn or even criticize us for our doubts in times of darkness and our moments of despair. He assures us that His grace is sufficient for us. He reminds us that His power is made perfect in our weakness. He says, “*Be still and know that I am God.*” He calls us to Himself for refreshment and encouragement that He might sustain us by the power of His word. He calls, “*Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.*” He offers Himself as the living bread which comes down from heaven, which we may eat and live forever. Not forever in this world of sin, sadness and death; forever in the kingdom of God in which death, sin and sorrow have forever gone. He has won the victory through the pain of His suffering and the darkness of His death. He earned the reward and gives its benefits to us in time in forgiveness and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. In eternity He will reward us fully in His resurrection to everlasting life.

John’s reward was to be faithful unto death. When John died his abused body was laid in the earth by faithful friends, but his soul was received into the house of the Lord. That’s a prophet’s reward. That’s every believer’s reward! John didn’t earn that reward through his service and suffering. It was the gift of God. Jesus earned that reward for John, for us and every human soul through His faithful service, suffering and sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus offers that reward for everyone to receive. Jesus gives it freely to all who believe! “*Be faithful into death and I will give you the crown of life.*”

People have commented on the sad end to which John came and how it wasn’t commensurate with his life of faithful service. John’s life is a pattern of life for all believers. Like John we are called to faith by the Holy Spirit through the word. Like John the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to us in the word and the washing of baptism. We too have times of joy, in which our faith is affirmed. We also have times of doubt, when our faith is tested. Our faith is tested so that God can make it stronger. God tests our faith so that like John, we will be able to see beyond the pain and indignities that may accompany our death and anticipate the crown of life that awaits us, which Jesus earned for us, through His suffering and death on the cross. Jesus says to us as He said to the church in Revelation, “*Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.*”

It’s tempting to feel sadness for John, because of the indignities he suffered and the brutal death he experienced. But one commentary I read cautioned against feeling sorry for John. We need not feel sorry for John. The ones we should feel sorry for are Herod, Herodias and her daughter, all those who reject Jesus and who refuse to receive His grace. John was blessed to share the sufferings of Christ. John was blessed to receive from Christ, the crown of life. We give thanks for John. He points us to Jesus as the Christ. He shows Him as the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. He has received a prophet’s reward, not death, but the crown of life. We await the same reward when our time comes to die. In the present time, we give thanks for the grace of God that like John, we believe in Jesus as the Christ and have the assurance He is with us. His grace will see us through all things! He will keep us faithful unto death that we too may receive the crown of life. God keep us in His grace and sustain our faith to that day. In Jesus’ Name. Amen