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Memorial of the Beheading of St John the Baptist, Martyr

Date: Friday, August 29, 2025 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 97:1, 2b, 5–6, 10–12 | **Response:** Psalm 97:12a
Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 5:10 (Proper)
Gospel Reading: Mark 6:17–29 (Proper)
Preached at: the Chapel of Richartz House **in the** Archdiocese of Harare, Zimbabwe.

The readings today are about the courage to live the truth, the holiness that flows from God's own life, and the cost and glory of a life spent entirely in His service. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the Word set before us does not flatter or soften; it speaks of paths that are narrow, of choices that demand everything, of a love for God that is worth more than comfort, safety, or the applause of the powerful. It invites us to stand where John stood: in the place where truth and power meet—and often clash.

Saint Paul, in his first letter to the Thessalonians, calls his hearers to holiness—not as an optional virtue for the especially pious, but as the very air that Christians breathe. In the pagan culture of his day, the body was often seen as a vessel for pleasure or as a cage to escape from, but Paul insists that the human body is a temple, a dwelling place of the Spirit. Holiness, he tells them, is not a rigid set of rules; it is a way of living entirely in communion with God, body and soul, so that every gesture, every word, every decision reflects His love. In a Zimbabwe where corruption often masquerades as normality, where exploitation hides behind smooth speeches, Paul's words echo like a bell: do not be conformed to the patterns around you; let your whole life be consecrated to the One who made you. Our dignity is not for sale, not to the highest bidder, nor to the lowest instinct.

The psalmist sings of the Lord who reigns, whose justice is not swayed by bribes or fear, whose presence melts the mountains like wax before a fire. The refrain —"Rejoice in the Lord, you just"—is not a hollow cheer; it is a summons to the kind of joy that survives even under the shadow of threat. The psalm's imagery is volcanic: mountains trembling, light breaking through the clouds. It is a reminder that God's justice is not a slow bureaucratic process; it is a living force

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that topples tyrants and lifts up the lowly. In our land, where injustice can seem immovable as granite, the psalm tells us to hold fast: the mountain is not stronger than the fire of God.

And then we come to the Gospel, where truth is imprisoned in a dungeon. John the Baptist—fiery preacher, unbending prophet—finds himself at the mercy of a weak man with a crown and a stronger woman with a grudge. Herod admired John, but admiration without conversion is a hollow coin; when pressed, it buys only compromise. In "The Chosen," John is portrayed with a fierce joy, a man whose whole being is given to pointing towards the Lamb of God. But here in Scripture, we see the cost of that joy: the executioner's sword, the platter carried to a banquet of the blind.

It is tempting to think of John's death as a tragic waste, but the Gospel sees it differently. His life was not measured in years but in truth spoken, in fidelity kept, in the witness that still burns centuries later. John was not silenced. Every martyr's blood becomes seed, and his courage feeds our courage still.

Ignatius would have us enter the scene—stand in that dim, airless cell, hear the shuffle of the guards, feel the roughness of the chains. How does John's face look when he hears the door open for the last time? There is no self-pity. There is a steady gaze, because he knows that his life is not being taken from him; it is being offered. And in that offering, he is most free.

Holiness, as Paul teaches, is not an escape from the world's dangers; it is an immersion into them with the armour of God. Justice, as the psalm proclaims, is not an abstract ideal; it is the living presence of God overturning the false thrones. And truth, as John shows us, is not a theory to be debated; it is a light that must be lived, even when it draws the sword.

In Zimbabwe today, we too are called to speak truth into systems that prefer silence, to live chastity in a culture that commodifies bodies, to honour the dignity of every person in the face of corruption, to defend the vulnerable even when it costs us friends or safety. The world may call this naïve. Scripture calls it holy.

The unifying image is clear: the fire that melts mountains, purifies gold, and gives light in the darkness. That fire burned in Paul's call to holiness, in the psalmist's vision of justice, and in John's fearless proclamation before kings.

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And that fire is not reserved for prophets long dead; it is offered to each of us here and now. It will burn in us if we dare to ask for it, and it will spread if we dare to live it.

So we leave here not with admiration for John, but with an invitation to join him —not in his cell, perhaps, but in his clarity, his courage, his joy in the God who is worth everything.

Reflect this week on these questions:

- Where in my life am I tempted to admire the truth but avoid living it?
- How might I let God's fire purify not just my thoughts, but my habits, my relationships, my daily choices?
- Who in my world today needs me to speak or act with John's courage, and what is stopping me?

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In preparing this homily, I consulted various resources to deepen my understanding of today's readings, including using Magisterium AI for assistance. The final content remains the responsibility of the author.