



Parish Information Bulletin

Program for 29 August - 4 September 2021

SUNDAY 29 AUGUST

BEHEADING OF THE FORERUNNER, ST JOHN THE BAPTIST,
Mark 6: 14-30

• 8.00am—Orthros and Divine Liturgy

WEDNESDAY 1 SEPTEMBER

Beginning of the Indiction

Holy 40 Virgin Martyrs

• 8.00am—Orthros and Divine Liturgy

2021 SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSES FOR ALL AGES

(A free voluntary program organised by the Church)

Lessons take place in the building behind the church and begin at 10.30am until Church dismissal.

We have classes for ages ranging from 5yrs to teenage years. Lessons are taught in a relaxed, friendly environment.

Please bring your children along to learn of their rich Orthodox faith and come close to God and His Love.

SUNDAY 5 SEPTEMBER

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 18: 23-35

EPISTLE READING: 1Corinthians 9: 2-12

Holy 40 Virgin-Martyrs and their Teacher the Hieromartyr Ammon the Deacon at Heraclea September 1

The Holy Forty Virgin Martyrs with their teacher, Deacon Ammon were captured by Baudos the governor, and were tortured because they would not offer sacrifice to idols. The holy martyrs endured many cruel torments, which were intended to force them to renounce Christ and worship idols. Later, they were sent to Heraclea in Thrace to appear before the tyrant Licinius. The valiant martyrs remained unshakeable, however. Saint Ammon and eight of the virgins were beheaded, ten virgins were burned, six of them died after heated metal balls were put into their mouths, six were stabbed with knives, and the rest were struck in the mouth and stabbed in the heart with swords.

Holy 40 virgin-martyrs and their teacher the Hieromartyr Ammon the Deacon at Heraclea in Thrace: Adamantine, Athena, Akrive, Antigone, Arivea, Aspasia, Aphrodite, Dione, Dodone, Elpinike, Erasmia, Erato, Ermeneia, Evertepe, Thaleia, Theano, Theonimpe, Theophane, Kalliroe, Kalliste, Kleio, Kleonike, Kleopatra, Koralia, Lambro, Margarita, Marianthe, Melpomene, Moscho, Ourania, Pandora, Penelope, Polymnia, Polynike, Sapfo, Terpsichore, Troada, Haido, and Harikleia.

BEHEADING OF THE FORERUNNER, ST JOHN THE BAPTIST, Mark 6: 14-30

Men-pleasing and Murder: A Homily for the Beheading of the Forerunner,

The memory of the righteous is praised, says King Solomon (Proverbs 10:7 LXX); but the Lord's testimony suffices the righteous one we remember today. What testimony? Among them that are born of women, there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11). What honour can our praises add to one who boasts such an eminent witness? How can the life that today is crowned with a glorious death be fittingly honoured? The life of St. John the Baptist towers so far above the life of ordinary, mortal men as to rival that of the angels. Indeed, the Prophet Malachi calls him such when he speaks of him, saying, Behold, I send my messenger—that is, αγγελος, angel—before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee (Malachi 3:1, Mark 1:2).

Before us lies an earthly angel, the greatest of those born of women, whose life was marked by exceptional manifestations of God's power and favour—whose birth was announced by an Archangel, who was miraculously conceived of a barren woman, who was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied while yet in his mother's womb, who received his name by a divine revelation, who was spared from the infanticidal rage of Herod by God's protection, who was sustained in wondrous manner for nearly three decades in the desert, eating locusts and wild honey off the desolate land, cared for by the Providence of God alone, who was mystically prepared by the Spirit for his unique ministry in God's salvific dispensation for the human race, given authority from heaven to preach repentance and baptism for the remission of sins, enlightened with discernment to tell the inward disposition of those who came to

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Telephone Contact Numbers

St Vasilios Church
9387 7693

Fr Athanasios
9383 4151

Fr Ephraim
0490 378 215

Website:
stvasiliosbrunswick.com

Fr Athanasios and
Fr Ephraim are available
at the Church every
Monday to Friday
between 4.00 and 6.00pm
for Holy Confession and
any spiritual need.



him, who suffered no hypocrisy, but brought low the mountain of man's pride with the fiery preaching of imminent judgment and retribution, who spoke the Lord's testimonies before kings and was not ashamed, who even when princes persecuted him, yet loved the law of the Lord most of all.

He brooked no compromise with the ways of the world, and earned for himself the world's hatred in return; though his ascetic demeanour and wondrous way of life also aroused the curiosity of the light-minded, and even a certain superficial respect. Even the depraved King Herod could sense that St. John was *righteous and holy* (Mark 6:20). As St. Mark tells us, *he observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly* (Mark 6:20). But Herod was an idle hearer of the word, and not a sincere doer. He loved the honour of men, and not *the honour that cometh from God only* (John 5:44), which honour comes to those who, like St. John, place the doing of his commandments above all else in every circumstance.

No, Herod—though he was decked in royal pomp and kingly purple, though he was rich and powerful, and lorded himself over his subjects—was the meanest and most abject of slaves; for he was a men-pleaser, in bitter thrall to the whims and fancies of other men's opinions and tastes, as are all the glorious and famous of this world. They have no root in themselves, no unchanging principles that guide their conduct or spur their conscience. They are whatever they need to be, as long as they can make the most men happy in whatever company they find themselves. They fight an impossible battle, for no man can please all men; all men, however, are capable of pleasing God, who is a much kinder master than the implacable passion of the men-pleaser.

Consider Herod, and how many people he cravenly tried to appease. It was not even for his own sake, after all, that he imprisoned St. John, but for the sake of Herodias, his sister-in-law, and his wife against the Law. He went so far as to lock up the saint to quench her spite, but he would not satisfy her murderous desire against him because he feared the multitudes, who rightly took John for a righteous and holy Prophet. The miserable men-pleaser could not stomach bringing down the ire of the people on himself by killing John. No, he even sought to please him as well, and listened to many of his counsels with pleasure, though not of course the one concerning his illicit wife.

It is only fitting that the evil king's vanity won him everlasting infamy as he celebrated his own birthday—a custom unknown to simple, devout Jews, but commonplace for Eastern despots. He held a sumptuous banquet, and invited the most notable and eminent men of the land. Full of vain mirth and not a little wine, he was stirred with incestuous lust for his own niece, whose damnable dance lured all the onlookers to perdition, and filled them with vile passion. The king made a rash oath and promised the young harlot whatever her heart desired. The guests were taken aback, and the girl's devious mind went to work. Not sure how best to answer, she left to conspire with her mother. Herodias, the coiled viper, then found her opportunity to strike, and instructed her daughter to ask for the saint's head on a platter. She did her mother's bidding, but the daughter's deference was not commendable. The Evangelist tells us that Herod was *exceeding sorry* (Mark 6:26) when he heard the request. While Herodias' daughter had stepped out, the room was full of obscene jokes and raucous laughter, and Herod's drunken gloating over his display of power. Now the all the blood drains from the ruddy, wine-flush cheeks of the tyrant, his face turns pale, his countenance falls, his stomach sinks, his heart throbs.

This is the inevitable fate of every men-pleaser—to be crushed between the contradictory and irreconcilable desires of sinful, fallen men. What he before refused to do for fear of men, the same passion now compels him to commit; for to spare himself embarrassment before all the men of high rank that feasted with him, he would not back down from his ill-considered oath. And he also refused, the Scripture says, *for his oath's sake* itself—so vain was Herod, that he would sooner put an innocent man to death than earn the reputation of being an oath-breaker. O foolish Herod! Better an oath-breaker than a murderer! Better a liar than a killer! But vainglory cannot tell its own good.

The sordid deed was done, and the Prophet's head was brought to Herodias' daughter in the midst of the banqueters. Christ's mystic presence at a wedding feast once turned water into wine; now the harlot's presence at a feast of debauchers has turned wine into blood. The hall was silent as the guests looked on in horror. All were sorrowful, though in the words of the festal hymns, it was not genuine sorrow, but a "vain and transitory one." Herod's conscience indeed reproached him, for when he heard of Jesus and his miracles, he was troubled, and his guilty conscience suggested to him that this must be John the Baptist, risen from the dead to haunt him. He wanted to lay eyes on Jesus, but in his frivolity, he merely hoped to see *some miracle done by him* (Luke 23:8), and not to hear the words of repentance which lead to eternal life.

Let us then take heed, and not fall into the same snare as Herod. The Lord himself affirms that we cannot serve two masters: we cannot serve God and our passions—or *know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?* (James 4:4) If we, like Herod, seek to indulge our passions while paying occasional lip-service to the Lord's prophets and saints, our duplicity will eventually be shown up, and our true colours revealed. So let us pay heed to the preaching of the Baptist—repentance, faith in Christ, and the bringing forth of fruits worthy of repentance. The axe of God's word is laid at the root of the trees. Think not in yourselves, "I am already an Orthodox Christian, I have found the true faith," or, "I am a monk, I have a beard and wear black, I have vowed my life to Christ." No, not according to what we have vowed—whether in baptism or in the tonsure—shall we be judged, but according to how we have kept it; and if we neglect so great a salvation, the Lord can just as well raise up faithful monks and laypeople from stones—that is, those who are hardened in sins, but are just one moment of repentance away from starting down the path of salvation to which the Lord has already called us.

So may we lay hold of sincere and fruitful repentance unto salvation, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the prayers of St. John the Baptist. Amen.

- Hierodeacon Basil