

## Homily for the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist August 29, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Jeremiah 1: 17–19; Psalm 71:1–8; Mark 6:7, 12–29\**

The 1949 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, meeting in San Francisco, approved the publication of a series of *Prayer Book Studies*. The first two were published in one thin paperback volume in 1950. The series concluded in 1989 with *Prayer Book Studies 30: Supplemental Liturgical Texts*.<sup>1</sup> Among the thirty, *Prayer Book Studies IX: The Calendar* is a favorite for a couple of reasons.<sup>2</sup> First, it kickstarted the process of the American Church rethinking the place of historical saints and martyrs. Second, unlike the studies of the calendar that were to follow, this one had four helpful appendices. Number 3 is unique in this series: “Notes on Certain Rejected Commemorations.”

*Prayer Book Studies* after the Second Vatican Council reflect an ecumenical opening absent in the earlier studies. The adjective “Romish,” instead of “Roman Catholic,” is used freely in *Prayer Book Studies IX*. My

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.librarything.com/series/Prayer+Book+Studies>, (accessed 29 August 2020).

<sup>2</sup> *Prayer Book Studies IX: The Calendar* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1957), 125–27.

late stepfather's college dictionary from 1949 says about this adjective, "chiefly used disparagingly."<sup>3</sup> But today is not the day to speak about the ecumenical climate among Christians, but about John.

Our commemoration today is among those rejected for inclusion. This the explanation:

*Beheading of St. John Baptist (Aug. 29), a major feast of the Western Church, appears as early as the [eighth century] Gelasian Sacramentary. It is included in all the Anglican Calendars. Of this festival, there is certainly an historical basis, both in the Gospels and in the Jewish historian Josephus. The Commission questions its appropriateness in a Christian Calendar, however, since there is no evidence that the Baptist's martyrdom was due to his faith in Christ. The only feast of the Baptist that is relevant to the Christian faith is that of his Nativity on June 24.*<sup>4</sup>

I wonder why this hardness of heart was applied to John. He isn't a prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke, he was the voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord."<sup>5</sup> John's

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<sup>3</sup> *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1949), s.v. "Romish," 735.

<sup>4</sup> *Prayer Book Studies IX*, 126–27.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 1:3; Matthew 3:3; Luke 3:4.

gospel, the Baptist says, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”<sup>6</sup>

As Jesus, Peter, James, and John descend the mountain of Transfiguration, the disciples ask Jesus, “Why do the scribes say that first Eli'jah must come?”<sup>7</sup> Jesus responds, “I tell you that Eli'jah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”<sup>8</sup> The beheading of John is told in Mark, Matthew, and Luke.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, let me speak of another rejected commemoration that makes for a useful comparison. The following words are from 1957, a pre-Vatican II world.

*“Anne (July 26), listed in all Anglican Calendars and also included in the list proposed for the American Book of 1928, is known as the name of the mother of our Lord’s mother only from apocryphal and utterly legendary sources. Of course, our Lord’s mother had a mother, too, and she was doubtless a good woman. But the fact is that we know nothing about her at all,*

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<sup>6</sup> John 1:23.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 9:11.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 9:13.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 6:17–29; Matthew 14:3–12; Luke 3:19–20.

*and cannot be certain of the authenticity of her name. The fact that many churches and religious guilds and societies are named for her does not create a history out of a vacuum.”*

By the time the first collection of collects and lessons for the proposed *Lesser Feasts* was published in 1963, a commemoration of “The Parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary” was included on July 26—the Roman Catholics include the apocryphal names. I don’t think they are necessary for us. I do like our collect:

*Almighty God, heavenly Father, we remember in thanksgiving this day the parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary; and we pray that we all may be made one in the heavenly family of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*<sup>10</sup>

Back to John. It’s not just John’s birth that matters for Christianity. He was the prophet who proclaimed the Christ, with these words in John, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! . . . I myself I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel . . . And I have seen and have borne witness that

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<sup>10</sup> *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2006), 321.

this is the Son of God.”<sup>11</sup> God sent him and we honor his life and witness today.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> John 1:29–34.