

History has a way of repeating itself. At the beginning of his life, John the Baptist leapt for joy in the womb of his mother Elizabeth when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, came to visit. John was born and 6 months later Jesus followed.

With today's memorial of the Passion of John the Baptist, John's birth into eternal life precedes the Passion of Jesus by a good 6 months. There are other similarities beyond the timing.

- Herod acknowledges the holiness of John the Baptist. He knew him "to be a righteous and holy man... and liked to listen to him" (Mark 6:20). Pilate was "amazed" at Jesus and found no wrong in him (Mark 15:5,14).
- Herod would not have put John to death were it not for the promise he made to his daughter and his desire not to be embarrassed in front of his dinner guests. "Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified" (Mark 15:15).
- John's death was brutal. His head was severed and brought to Herod on a silver platter. Jesus was crucified, the most painful and humiliating way to die that the Romans could think of (6:29).
- After John's death, his disciples came and took his body, laying it in a tomb. Jesus was taken down from the cross, and Joseph of Arimathea placed his body in a new tomb (15:45-46)

History has a way of repeating itself. 52 years ago, the nation was preparing to elect a new president and racial tensions were very high. On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr was assassinated. Bobby Kennedy was running for president and spoke as riots were breaking out around the country:

- Martin Luther King, Jr dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort. In this difficult day ... you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization ... Or, we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.

Having lost his elder brother to an assassin, Bobby knew the temptation "to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act" but he understood, that violence only begets more violence, and brings more tears and more hatred. He challenged everyone to respond differently:

- What we need in the United States is not division; [...it] is not hatred; [...it] is not violence or lawlessness, but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black.<sup>1</sup>

The nation was still in shock two months later when another assassin killed Bobby Kennedy on June 6, 1968. At his funeral, his younger brother Teddy gave the eulogy borrowing from a speech Bobby had made in South Africa:

- There is discrimination in this world and slavery and slaughter and starvation. Governments repress their people; millions are trapped in poverty while the nation grows rich and wealth is lavished on armaments everywhere. These are differing evils, but they are the common works of man. They reflect the imperfection of human justice, the inadequacy of human compassion, our lack of sensibility towards the suffering of our fellows. But we can perhaps remember -- even if only for a time -- that those who live

with us are our brothers; that they share with us the same short moment of life; that they seek -- as we do -- nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and happiness ... Surely, this bond of common faith, this bond of common goal, can begin to teach us something. Surely, we can learn, at least, to look at those around us as fellow men. And surely we can begin to work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us and to become in our own hearts brothers and countrymen once again<sup>ii</sup>

Teddy concluded the eulogy with a few of his own thoughts: “My brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life; to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it.”

History has a way of repeating itself. The death of John the Baptist did not silence Jesus. Martin Luther King, Jr knew what happened to biblical prophets and yet he had the courage to continue to speak out for justice and racial equality. Jesus knew that others wished to silence him and that he would undergo his own passion and death. He continued to preach the truth and he recognized that he must sacrifice his own life to free humanity from the ravages of sin. The blood of every martyr helps others to realize that there is something worth fighting for. We do not need more blood, but we do need a death to our own sinfulness, our own hatred, our own violence toward others.

In the present, we see injustice as black men are beaten, strangled, and killed. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:10). Those whose lives are cut short through injustice will know justice in Christ Jesus.

We see injustice in retaliatory violence, in looting, and arson, and rioting. “Stop judging, that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you” (Mt 7:1-2).

We see peaceful protesters who march for change. We see dedicated policemen and policewomen who risk their lives so that others may protest and exercise their freedom of speech. And we hear the echo of Jesus calling us to reconcile our differences and work together to build the kingdom of God. “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). Let us listen for the prophets among us today and help them to boldly proclaim the truth that we may all be free of the tyranny of man’s inhumanity to man.

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<sup>i</sup> [theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/robert-f-kennedy-death-martin-luther-king-jr/612433/](https://theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/robert-f-kennedy-death-martin-luther-king-jr/612433/)

<sup>ii</sup> [americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ekennedytributetork.html](https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ekennedytributetork.html)