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John the Baptist

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Incidents in the Middle East and in the drug wars in Mexico have brought beheading back into the headlines. This swift and macabre form of execution was common in the ancient world. Herod's dispatching of John the Baptist, like the brutal fate of all the male infants in Nazareth under Herod's father, sent a signal that a faltering and corrupt royal house would do anything to preserve its sovereignty.

John's beheading also served as metaphor for the gospel writers who emphasized that his greatness was as the last great prophet under the Law. He dies without understanding the new dispensation of grace he had ushered in by pointing to Jesus. He serves as the blind wedge that opens new vistas for God's unconditional and universal love. As a faithful servant, he enters what he could not have imagined, the last martyr of one story and the first hero of the next, arriving headless into the kingdom of God.

Back in the 1970s, as the Vatican II reforms challenged everyone to think outside the royal box, a Dominican priest friend remarked that he needed more than just new ideas; he needed a whole new head. His consternation at the rapid pace of the reforms echoes Jesus' own struggle to explain how new wine needed new wineskins. "The Son of Man," he said, 'has no place to lay his head." To be faithful to the tradition is also to be radical in affirming and obeying its essentials. For Jesus, the entire law, enhanced and obscured with a thousand lesser commands, was reducible to the single command to love God and neighbor. Do this and everything else is fulfilled.

But to live like this is often not to know whether you are right, to be a blind wedge at the growing edge, taking love into unexplored territory, ambiguity and dilemmas, trial and error situations where risking failure is the only way to learn what love requires. John the Baptist learned how to think with his heart in order to recognize Jesus as the One came not with judgment, but instead sight to the blind, welcome for the outcast, freedom to the oppressed, forgiveness to sinners. But This is how John found his way home, not by a head trip but as a journey of the heart.

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