

Birthday of John the Baptist June 24, 2018

Isaiah 49:1-6, Acts 13:22-26, Luke 1:57-66, 80

Today the Sunday liturgy of ordinary time gives way to a feast, a great feast: that of the Birth of John the Baptist, who was chosen by God to prepare the way for the coming of his Son Jesus into this world. It is indeed a great feast, a feast of joy, but above all a feast of mercy. Elizabeth, the mother of John, who was called barren received the gratuitous gift from God, the extraordinary favor of conceiving a son in her old age. The scriptures tell us that her neighbors and kinsfolk rejoiced with her for the favor granted to her by God. This is also a feast of mercy primarily because the birth of John proclaimed the coming birth of the Messiah, Christ, and the Son of God made man, sent to earth to redeem humanity from sin. John while in his mother's womb was sanctified and washed of his original sin by Jesus who was in the womb of Mary, his Mother. Christians have long interpreted the life of John the Baptist as a preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ, and the circumstances of his birth, as recorded in the New Testament, are miraculous. The sole biblical account of birth of John the Baptist comes from the Gospel of Luke. It was the firm belief among the faithful that John was freed from original sin at the moment when his mother met the Blessed Virgin. John came to bear witness to the light, to prepare an upright people for the Lord. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "John the Baptist was more than a prophet. In him the Holy Spirit concludes his speaking through the prophets. He completes the cycle of prophets that began with Elijah.

John the Baptist played a unique role in the history of God's people. He acted as the bridge between the Hebrew and Christian Testaments. He basically belongs to the former but was present at the beginnings of the latter. At the same time he died before Jesus had completed his work and before the Church came into existence. Jesus praised his greatness but at the same time said that even the least in the Kingdom was greater than he. While he knew and proclaimed Jesus as the one that all were waiting for and the thongs of whose sandals he was not worthy to loose, he never saw Jesus as his Risen Lord, a privileged granted to the very least of the baptized. John has his mission and his mission was to go ahead of the Messiah and proclaim his coming. As he said modestly of himself that Jesus must increase while he himself must decrease. The success of his mission would eventually make him redundant. John came

to bear witness to the Light. He was the witness to the coming of the Spirit on Jesus and remains with him during the Baptism of our Lord. Once he had prepared the way for him and performed the duty assigned to him as the prophet he would quietly withdraw from the scene. When he saw the Lord coming he pointed him out to his disciples to indicate that he was the Lamb of God. He encouraged his disciples to follow him and he becomes the bridge in the building of the kingdom of God on earth. In fact that is still the role of the missionary today – to plant the church and then withdraws, leaving it in the hands of the new local community.

The First Reading of today from the Book of Isaiah speaks of the divine choice in the life of the Servant of God. The passage tells us of the pre-knowledge of God in the life of the prophet as it is in the life of every person. Even before he was born, while he was in his mother's womb God chose and him and gave him a name. It is God who makes use of him as his own instrument in the proclaiming of the word. When he proclaimed the Word of God, it was like a sharp sword that pierced even the hardened hearts. The people paid attention to his teaching and heard the message of God. Paul tells us that the Word of God is the Sword of the Holy Spirit and the letter to the Hebrews says that the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged Sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit leaving everything open and bare. Further God was speaking to the people of Israel says that their final destiny was for the righteous of Israel to be a light for the Gentiles and to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. He will indeed bless them and will make their offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. Their offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by their offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for them, because the chosen prophet has listened to his voice. All the nations were called to gain their blessings through the Jewish nation. While this was God's original calling for His people, their desire for political greatness had obscured their original calling. The prophet expresses his frustration over what seems like a wasted ministry. But the Lord encourages his Servant by extending his mission. Not only will the Servant be chosen to restore the Jewish nation, but he will also be a light to the ends of the earth announcing the good news that salvation has come.

In the Second Reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul insists that the coming of Jesus is the consummation of history. He outlines the history of the Jews and shows how it culminates in Christ. It is planned according to the

divine purpose. Paul here uses purely the Jewish argument as he speaks of the criteria that God set when he chose David as king. King David was a man after His heart, which would carry out all His wishes. The resurrection is the fulfillment of the prophecy because the promises were made to David were obviously not fulfilled in him but were fulfilled in Christ. As King David was anointed by God, Jesus, the Messiah, was also anointed. Paul says that from David's posterity God had brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. The title of Savior to Israel meant that Jesus was the "Exalted One," whose function it is to save. Through Jesus, salvation came to all those who had faith in Him, who received the Church Sacraments and who persevered in their living faith. Before the coming of Jesus, John the Baptist had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. John the Baptist opened the way to Jesus. Once Jesus appeared on the scene, John's calling had come to an end. As John the Baptist said, "I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals of his feet." Jesus, God incarnate, was more powerful than John the Baptist. In concluding his discourse to the Israelites, Paul reminded them that the message that they had heard from John the Baptist was a message of Salvation and message of Jesus.

Today as we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist we reflect on the Gospel passage. In Luke's gospel there are many parallels between the birth of John and that of Jesus. Both births were announced in advance: in John's case to his father Zechariah and in Jesus' case to his mother Mary. The birth of John was a special blessing to his parents, who were already advanced in age, and particularly to Elizabeth. They in fact had lost hope of having any child. So when the birth took place it was a special occasion of rejoicing among relatives and neighbors. The Gospel tells us that when they heard "that the Lord had shown her so great a kindness, they shared her joy". Everyone knew what a shame it was for a woman not to give a child, especially a son, to her husband. On the eighth day after the birth of the child they did the Jewish ritual of naming the child and to indicate that the child belonged to God's own people. It was also the day on which the child was officially accepted into the community. A name is what expresses the entire personality of a being. And when the Lord himself bestows a name upon someone, this means that he who receives this name is truly known as such in the very Spirit of God.

In accordance with prevailing custom, it was expected that the child would be called Zechariah after his father. But Elizabeth interjected to say that he should

be called John. This came as a surprise as there was no one of that name in the family. The father who had become dumb after his encounter with the Angel was then consulted. He was possibly also deaf because the people communicated to him by signs. He replied by writing on a tablet that he should be called John, the name suggested by the angel. This act of obedience on the part of Zechariah resulted in his speech coming back and his glorifying God. The Gospel tells us that the neighbors were filled with awe and the whole affair was talked about throughout the hill country of Judea." The entire event was clearly understood as a direct intervention of God. From that point on, John bears a name which did not belong to his ancestors: he bears a new name! A name is what expresses the entire personality of a being. And when the Lord himself bestows a name upon someone, this means that he who receives this name is truly known as such in the very Spirit of God. Now, the name of John means "grace". By naming him thus, the Lord already sees in him his own Son; John is not the Son of God made man, but it is he who announces him, it is he who is his living sign.

In words similar to those used of Jesus, we are told that the boy grew up and matured. Probably his elderly parents died while he was young and he went to live in the Desert of Judea, which lies between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. And it was there, along the banks of the River Jordan that he began his public preaching. He would have been about 30 years of age, the same age as his cousin, Jesus. He is now called by God to prepare the way of his son's public ministry. He is there at the bank of the river Jordan preaching repentance and baptizing and announcing the Good News. John was the last and in some ways the greatest of the Hebrew Testament prophets. As the preface for today's Mass says he was chosen "from all the prophets to show the world its redeemer, the Lamb of sacrifice". It was he, who in John's gospel, points out Jesus to his disciples as the "Lamb of God". He was also privileged to baptize Christ, the giver of Baptism in waters made holy by the one who was baptized, says the preface. To the people of Jerusalem he was presented as a man of total honesty and integrity. Perhaps it was this which attracted so many to come and hear him. Finally, because of this he ultimately lost his life when he denounced King Herod who had married his brother's wife. He was "found worthy of a martyr's death, his last and greatest act of witness to your Son".

When John the Baptist was born, his father, Zechariah, was dumb. This was the indication of a penance for his unbelief. Indeed, nine months earlier, when

Zechariah was in the Temple, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him to announce that his wife was going to have a son. He became dumb for the fact that he doubted the divine message. During these nine months Zechariah had time to reflect upon all the working of God in his life and to meditate upon the goodness and the mercy of the Lord who had condescended to cast his gaze upon his family, with the coming of a person who would be proclaiming to all the People the arrival of Messiah. So, when the moment came to give his son a name, he did not hesitate: he confirmed what his wife Elizabeth had said that his name has to be John. The miracle of healing his voice took place at his believing. Once he was able to speak, his words were of glorifying God before the assembled people. Truly, the birth of John the Baptist took place at a decisive moment, one that was crucial to all humanity. Zechariah, his father, was the first witness of this: he proceeded from being incredulous to becoming a believer; from being dumb to becoming the one who proclaimed the praises and the blessings of the Almighty.

Everyone has a call from God and has his own vocation. John the Baptist had an unusual vocation, to be interiorly prepared for the mission that had been entrusted to him. This was his hidden life which he spent quietly in the desert in prayer and penance. This was his life with the Spirit of the Lord who would lead him later into life even to the level of Martyrdom at the hands of evil Herod. This was his secret which he built in himself ultimately to reveal Jesus in his life. We are told that the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel. In many ways this looks similar to the preparation of Mary for the coming of the Lord into her on the day of the Annunciation. For Mary had also received a new name from God: the angel Gabriel called her by the name of full of grace. But Mary was the person who fully understood the working of the Spirit in her life prepared the dwelling place of God in the sinful world. She was the one who was purified even before her conception and remains for us the purest of all creatures. Today we ask our blessed Mother to guide us as we prepare ourselves to receive Jesus her son into our lives and like John the Baptist keep the paths straightened and ready to accept him.

John the Baptist's life has a special meaning for all of us. We are, through our baptism, also called to be precursors of the Lord. Our baptism imposes on us an obligation to share our faith and to give witness to the Way of Jesus, both in word and action. There is no other way by which the average person can come

to know and experience the love of Christ. In that sense, we are all called to be “preachers”. Our lives individually and collectively are meant to send out a message and an invitation: “Come and join us and share our experience of faith, love and fellowship.” Let us ask John the Baptist today to help us by the way we live our lives to clear a path which will draw people closer to knowing and experiencing Christ. We may not be prophets but we are still called to testify to the Light. We are called to testify as to what Jesus did for us. And we are called to testify as to what Jesus has done for the world by promoting His message of salvation.

A little girl visited a farm one day and asked to buy a large watermelon. That big one you got on your hand costs 3 dollars said the farmer. I’ve got only 30 cents replied the girl. 30 cents will buy you a small watermelon replied the farmer. How about that melon, asked the farmer pointing to a small watermelon in the field. Okay, I’ll take it smiled the little girl. Here’s your 30 cents but leave it on the vine. I’ll be back for it in a month. This pretty little girl was really smart. She knew her patience would be rewarded. By waiting one month, she could have a big, ripe watermelon for the price of a little green one.

Fr Eugene Lobo S.J., Bangalore, India