

Nativity of St. John Baptist

I take my text today from the Epistle Lesson in the 40th chapter of Isaiah, verses 3 and 4:

"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy sight, O' Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer."

Today we celebrate the Nativity of John the Baptist, proclaimed by our Lord as the greatest of all the prophets. Indeed, it is in the opening chapter of the Gospel of St. John the Apostle that we are first introduced to this forerunner of our Lord in just a few of the most extraordinary verses of Holy Scripture, verses are commonly read again and again at the close of the Holy Eucharist:

IN the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

Here, in the Gospel passage from St. John the Apostle, we find the prophet named whereas in the words from Isaiah he is not named but the implication is clear.

You may read the entire passage beginning on page 97 of the Prayer Book.

As for those prophetic words from Isaiah, they convey precisely the mission of John as he understood it, indeed, as each of the Evangelists who authored the four Gospels understood it.

The story of John the Baptist is well documented in the New Testament. St. Luke, in particular, vividly describes how the Angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias while he was performing his priestly duties in the Temple. There, the angel announced to Zacharias that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son.

Elizabeth was cousin to the Virgin Mary and well past the childbearing age.

The angel tells Zacharias to name his son, John and foretells his mission as the forerunner to the Messiah.

As a further sign, the angel causes Zacharis to be unable to speak until the day John is presented in the temple and named.

In the sixth month of her pregnancy, Elizabeth is visited by Mary. At the sound of Mary's voice, the unborn child leaps in the womb of Elizabeth. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth greets Mary with the salutation that has rung through the ages:

"Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb."

These are the same words that the angel spoke to Mary when he appeared unto her and announced that she was to bear a son.

Now, when the time was come, true to the angel's words delivered to Zacharias, a son was born to Elizabeth. On the eighth day when the child was presented for naming, Zacharias' tongue was loosed when he proclaimed that the child was to be called John.

The story of John's birth is quite remarkable. He is set aside, dedicated to God in similar fashion to Samson. Zacharias understood the role his son was to play as a prophet and as the forerunner to the Messiah.

John appeared also to understand that he was set aside for a special reason and prepared for his mission as a prophet and forerunner by living in the desert, apart from the world, in prayer and meditation.

Finally, as we see in St. Luke's account, John receives the word from God that it is time to leave the desert and begin his mission.

So, in the area around Jordan, he begins preaching a baptism of repentance, echoing the words of Isaiah as "The voice of one crying in the wilderness."

The cry: "Repent and be baptized."

Before John, baptism, though common in Judaism, was limited to the proselytes, those newly converted to Judaism.

For the Jews themselves, baptism was unnecessary. They firmly believed that Abraham had earned sufficient merit to cover them all, those past, present, and future; that because they were Jews, not for any merit of their own, but for the merit earned by Abraham, they had nothing to fear in the life to come.

But John's message disputed the whole concept of a treasury of merit. He issued both a threat and a promise.

His threat is that a degenerate age, the spiritually bankrupt, those who espouse evil, cannot attain to salvation simply on the merits of the past. The reaper will lay the fields bare and winnow the grain casting the chaff into the fire.

His promise, though, is that there is One who is to come whose sandals he, John, was not fit to unlatch.

The Promised One would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The Spirit would be the breath of life and enable them to recognize God's truth when they see it. Furthermore, the Spirit would be able to re-create each of us, enter into us and change our human ignorance into divine knowledge.

John issued his cry to the Jews: Repent and be baptized.

Now, the repentance John preached was more than an acknowledgment of one's sin and an asking for forgiveness.

John's repentance is a turning away from sin and a turning toward God.

It is a change in one's life that leads to a change in one's conduct, a change in one's attitude toward God; it is a religious and moral reformation of the individual.

This concept the Jews understood. But they also firmly believed that, as Jews, as the children of Abraham, they were exempt from judgment.

John called them to task for their arrogance and he attacked evil wherever he saw it.

But John's message was as positive as it was negative. He called people to righteousness. He did not just condemn them for what they were but reminded them of what they could be.

His was not only a denunciation for what people had done but was also a summons to do what they ought to do.

If we stop for a moment and put it into perspective: John's message holds true today just as it did two millennia ago.

We are called to repentance and to be baptized.

We are challenged to effect a change in our lives and to turn away from sin and toward God.

We are reminded that the reality of our repentance may be seen in the fruits that are produced.

As the prophet and forerunner, John prepares us for the Messiah, recalling that in the sight of God, each of us is of infinite worth and God actively seeks our redemption; He wants us to come to our senses and repent.

To truly repent requires a radical change in us, just as with the Jews of John's day. We must re-examine our values, adjust our priorities, raise our standards, and lower the barriers we tend to place between us and those we consider less fortunate for whatever reason.

By standards, I mean our standards of Faith, of Worship, of Personal Conduct and Personal Ethics, and of Individual Worth.

God sees us as creatures of infinite worth. Out of His Love for us, He has given us a set of Rules or Commandments by which to live, and through His Son, He has established His Church as a sphere of Grace through which we may attain to salvation.

Return, again, to the words of Isaiah:

Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

In those days, when a dignitary was to travel, servants were sent in advance to clear the roadway of obstacles, of barriers, of most anything that would get in the way of the person traveling. They would make straight the highway, which in those days was little more than, perhaps, a cart path; they would straighten it up to make the journey smoother for the traveler.

So, John set out on his mission to clear the way for our Lord, to prepare the Jewish people for the arrival of their Saviour, the Messiah.

With the way prepared, the highway made straight, Jesus began His ministry and journey to the Cross.

Now, it is our turn to take to the highway made straight by our Lord and complete our journey. Though it may not be an easy journey, nevertheless, the way has been prepared for us. Indeed, we are not lonely travelers; we have been well provisioned; we have been given the best of road maps; and we have the Holy Spirit as our guide.

We have our marching orders from John the Baptist: repent and be baptised.

And when we stumble along the way, we have our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to pick us up, bind up our wounds, and strengthen us so that we may continue our journey home.

With outstretched arms, Jesus beckons us:

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heaven laden, and I will refresh you.