

The Nativity of John the Baptist Year B

Culture and tradition play an important part in the names people are given. A name must be carefully considered as it conveys vital facts and information. Normally it is a parental right to name children, although in some cases the decision may be left to others! Each child born or unborn gives evidence of God's magnificent creativity and by our name, we are led further into life's mystery by a Spirit of Wonder and Awe. "While I was in my mother's womb, You knew and named me.

Mother church invites us today to celebrate what is in essence a naming and Jewish admission ritual. It's a rare honour, reserved for Jesus, Mary and few others. It is as though John, were additionally, being adopted into the Holy Family. With John's birth, past and future connections are underway to bring the age of prophets to its climax. We must admit, there have been some great ones throughout Israel's storied past. Majors, minors, Isaiahs, Jerimiah, Ezekiel, along with others who served the critical role of delivering, God's life giving messages.

Some of those spokespeople, might even have been as magnificent preachers as Fr Jonathon and Fr Jerome. Now, I don't know exactly when the nativity of Fr Jonathon took place, but the name John means "God is gracious" and the birth of John the Baptist we celebrate today connects us in every way to Jesus. God's ultimate expression of grace.

John's relationship with Jesus begins in the womb. From a speechless father, and mother believed barren, the family is visited by another woman, also unexpectedly with child. The story of both moms, is of two amazing sisters in faith. One advanced in years, the other very young. Both daughters of Abraham and filled with the Holy Spirit. Their sons will meet again down the road at a site in the Jordon. But until then John will preach and baptize, calling on his people to repent of ungodly ways.

John's preaching style is like no other, except maybe the odd Franciscan. He lives in the dessert, eats bugs and grasshoppers, dresses kind of rough and occasionally, calls his assembly unflattering names. Now I must admit, these are techniques, not especially encouraged of homilists in this diocese. But John also defends Marriage and Justice against a less than reputable Governor. That insubordination that will land the preacher in jail, and cost him his life. Still his countercultural movement is very attractive to many, including several who will later join Jesus.

But friends, let's not forget that today is first and foremost the Lord's Day. John would be the first to tell us, he is not the messiah. He instead points like a sacrament, to the True Lamb of God. No, John isn't the answer, but he knows the right question. And certainly his movement is one that Jesus can, and will, build upon.

His father, Zachariah, is a soft-spoken priest, and knows well, who's in charge of naming his offspring. People are at first bewildered by the name chosen for his child. There seems to be a breach of culture and tradition happening at this child's circumcision and naming rite. A disturbing threat perceived by the pious covenant bearing descendants of Abraham. Remember, this is the only child of elderly parents and a son, who during that period and in that culture, are of course, favoured. But God like all parents, reserves the right to name and change people's name. Abrah becomes Abraham, Jacob becomes Israel and let's not forget Simon becomes Peter.

So Mom says the boy's name is John and Dad quickly puts it in writing. He knows you can take your chances arguing with God, but you can't overrule mom. John grows to become the great prelude to Jesus' coming. And, it should surprise no one that his name for all generations afterwards also bearers the title of his life's work. Baptist isn't, John surname but rather his life's calling. Our baptism too is not to be merely something that happens for quick moment on a Sunday afternoon. In fact, Baptism, is God's precious gift left unopened, if no steps are taken forward into the sacramental life of the Church. Not only is our baptism a portal into the sacramental nature of the church, moreover it orients our journey home to God, like a funnel gathers and concentrates.

In English we employ the suffix “en” to words. Darken means ‘to make’ the space dark! Brighten is ‘to make’ the space bright. Similarly, “to Christen” another term we use at Baptism, is to begin the sacramental process of making Christ evident in our world. And so as we celebrate the Nativity of John the Baptist, let the baptized always be mindful, of the awesome responsibility we have to become people of our Christening. Under the most holy name of Christian, given at baptism, may we always and joyfully sound aloud the way of the Lord?

Amen