

The Solemnity of John the Baptist  
June 24, 2020

*The Inauguration of the Era of Grace*

I think one of the most moving scenes in the Gospel relates to John the Baptist, who while languishing in prison, asks his disciples to go to Jesus with the question:

*“Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another.”*

With this question we are given an insight into John’s situation as he is about to face the wrath of Herodias and Herod for naming their relationship immoral. In jail he is wondering – is Jesus the one who is to come? The Gospel’s are not explicit in clarifying if John’s disciples ever got the message to him that Jesus is indeed the One. It is possible John went to his death with his question resonating in his heart.

And while John was questioning the legitimacy of Jesus’ messiah-ship, the New Testament and the Church is clear on affirming the centrality of John in the unfolding of the story of salvation. The Church has emphasized the importance of John the Baptist from very early times. The Mass we are celebrating today has been marked by the Church since the 4<sup>th</sup> century. St. Augustine observed that aside from Jesus and Mary there is no other saint whose birth is marked with a Solemnity.

Not only does the New Testament have a detailed account of John’s birth, it also contains more details about his death than any other New Testament person, with the exception of Jesus.

So why is John the Baptist so important that we remember him in this special way this morning?

I want to highlight one reason. John the Baptist is important because his ministry inaugurated the era of Grace.

How do we know that John’s ministry inaugurated the era of Grace? Our Gospel reading for this today illustrates this clearly. We understand from this reading that the neighbours and relatives believed the boy should be called Zechariah therefore showing the continuity with the family line. But no, say both parents, his name will be John - a name never before used in the family. Why were they so insistent on this? The 3<sup>rd</sup> century Church Father Origen explained it this way:

*The name Zechariah means “remembering God,” but John signifies “pointing to.” Now “memory” relates to something absent, “pointing to,” to something present. But John was not about to set forth the memory of God as absent, but with his finger to point him out as present, saying, Behold the Lamb of God.*

This so helpful in seeing why John the Baptist is so important. As he said in John’s Gospel, “I must decrease and Jesus must increase. I must always point to him whose whole life inaugurates the era of Grace.” An era that is always present, most especially in the Sacraments of the Church. Jesus is the one who is eternally present to us as the Great I Am. Zechariah and Elizabeth understood this and so emphatically stated his name will be John.

There are two more things to say about the importance of John's birth. It is only after Zechariah writes that "his name is John" that Luke tells us:

***And they all marveled. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.***

What is the significance of the priest's voice restored only after this declaration? Zechariah is silent and loses his voice until John, the precursor of the Lord, is born and restores his voice. The silence of Zechariah is nothing but the age of prophecy lying hidden, obscured, as it were, and concealed before the preaching of Christ. At John's arrival Zechariah's voice is released, and it becomes clear at the coming of the one who was foretold. The release of Zechariah's voice at the birth of John is a parallel to the rending of the veil at Christ's crucifixion. If John were announcing his own coming, Zechariah's lips would not have been opened. The tongue is loosened because a voice is born.

Jesus said of John the Baptist he was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. Therefore the silence of Zechariah is to help us understand that apart from Jesus Christ we cannot understand the Law and the Prophets. The Old Testament is veiled and unclear – muted. But as John will be the voice declaring the grace that is in Jesus Christ the integration of the Old Covenant with the New can be understood as coming into focus with the ministry of John the Baptist.

So we see that John's birth is important because it points to Jesus and because of this the Old Testament can be understood in a way not possible apart from Jesus. Thirdly his birth is important because of what his name means. John's name means; "The Grace of God"

The Church therefore honours St John the Baptist today and invites us to also be men and women who point others to the Lamb of God. As the Patron Saint of Canada may we be inspired by John's honest questioning and devoted proclamation of the Era of Grace. Let our lives embody the qualities of grace and our words be ones that help others to see in us people who are decreasing so that Jesus may increase. When we have times where we struggle and perhaps ask: "Is Jesus the one" or wonder "Have I labored in vain?" may we learn from John to keep our lives fixed on Jesus. We know that in Him all that the prophets foretold is fulfilled and are voices can be loosed to bless and glorify God.