

Sunday, June 24, 2009

Nativity of St. John the Baptist

Conventual Mass

What, Then, Will This Child Be?

Being a prophet means speaking in God's name.

We have several accounts of the prophet's call notably that of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In reality they were part of God's saving plan before time began "The Lord called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name (Is 49:1). The prophet's calling meant that he was to be unconditionally available to God for the missions entrusted to him.

And his would prove to be a difficult and often unpopular one: "I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength" but to this Isaiah would add "yet my reward is with the Lord my recompense is with my God (Is 49:4)." It would be the voice of the prophet that would try to call Israel back to its first fervor by conversion and repentance. It was

a difficult work to which the Lord called the prophet and would often enough meet with rejection, persecution and death.

After a long hiatus in which Israel would be without prophets, another, the last and a bridge between the Old and New Covenant would be born...

Of him, Jesus would say: "I assure you, there is no man born of woman greater than John (Lk 7: 28)."

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, Zechariah like Mary was troubled. When he heard the angel's message, Zechariah, who had prayed so fervently with his wife for a child, became doubtful.

According to the natural order of things this was impossible.

When Zechariah wrote on his tablet "John is his name," he acknowledge the truth of Gabriel's

message. He and Elizabeth could not have chosen another name for the son God had given them and who was destined for a great mission, Elizabeth's pregnancy had proved to him that the divine messenger had told the truth. Zechariah had forgotten that with God all things are possible.

As soon as Zechariah was capable of speaking again, he blessed God and sang his praises in the "joy and gladness" the angel had promised. He was the first of all those whom the announcement of the good news would delight. At this time too, "fear" – an attitude made of respect and astonishment in the presence of the divine was made manifest. This fear led the people to ask, "What then will this child be? For surely the hand of the Lord was with him." ⁱⁱ

In his hymn of praise, Zechariah would prophecy:
“And you, my child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord* to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins” (Lk 1:76, 77),
John’s mission, like the mission of the prophets before him, was also to be a difficult one, and he would know tragedy, at least according to human standards. His calling separated him early from his parents as the Spirit led him into the desert. There is also something strange about him: his rough clothes, his sparse diet, and his fiery voice loudly proclaiming the immanent judgment of the world.

Like all the prophets, like Jesus himself, he preached a message of conversion and repentance.
And the people, who recognized the voice of God

speaking through John, flocked to hear him. Finally, the authorities, who had the right to know who and what this man was all about, came to question him. And John, who in his popularity could have had the people at his feet, answered simply and profoundly: “I am not the Messiah. [I am] a herald’s voice in the desert crying, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord’” (Lk 3:4).

Yet in the presence of Jesus, John’s voice became sweet and a deep humility would shine out like the rays of the sun: “The theme of his preaching was: “One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you in water; he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit” (Mrk 1: 7-8). When Jesus appeared before John to be baptized, John at first recoiled: “I should

be baptized by you, yet you come to me” (Mtt 4:14)! Finally, he pointed his disciples away from himself, pointing to Jesus: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the World” (Jhn 1:29). The mission of the Forerunner was now fulfilled; “Now I have seen for myself and have testified, ‘This is God’s chosen One” (Jhn 1:34).

And yet this great saint was human like the rest of us. Languishing in prison and soon to be beheaded, doubts began to assail him. Had he misjudged Jesus? Jesus seemed more tolerant and gentler than John’s fiery message seemed to predict. Had his life, after all, been in vain? Had he disappointed God? And he sent disciples to Jesus with the question: “Are you ‘He who is to come’ or do we look for someone else” (Luke 7: 20)? And Jesus

sent back the response: “The blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them (Luke 7:22). John’s disciples returned with Jesus’ reply and told him of the miracles they had witnessed. And in this John knew without a doubt that the ancient messianic prophecies had been fulfilled and that his life had borne fruit. His heart leaped once more within him, and he went with joy to his death, the same joy that caused him to leap in his mother’s womb at the approach of the Messiah in Mary’s womb.

And the prophet John has something to say to us as the church celebrates his feast. We who have been baptized have also been anointed as prophets. That is to speak in God’s name and to proclaim God’s

word to others. John the Baptist goes before us to show us that our lives, our thoughts, words and actions must point away from ourselves to Christ, and so to bring the hearts of others to leap with joy at the presence of Christ among us.

i" Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v.7, Solemnities and Feasts (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1994) 158

ii" Days of the Lord, 158