

The Nativity of St John the Baptist  
(Isaiah 49:1-6 / Luke 1:57-66, 80)  
24.06.2015

Some of us may be old enough to remember Muhammad Ali's cry of victory: *I am the greatest!* Great boxer he may well have been, but, despite his claim to be the greatest, Cassius Clay was not the greatest man born of woman.

It is to John the Baptist that this honour belongs.

Jesus testifies to John the Baptist's greatness in Matthew's gospel saying: *Of all the men born of women there is no greater than John the Baptist.* And this note is added: *He is the greatest after Christ.*

As for the Baptist himself, he is on record as having proclaimed his lowliness.

Just as Mary, God's servant, the one through whom Christ came into the world, could say of herself: *The Lord has looked upon the humble state of his handmaid*, so the Baptist can say of himself *I am not worthy even to undo the sandal-strap of Jesus.* Furthermore, we remember John's word: *I must decrease, so that He (the Christ) may increase.*

John wanted Jesus to take all His place, to have *centre-stage*, as it were. John renounced the honours others wanted to afford him, so that Jesus might be better recognised for who He was (the Christ) and revealed in all His glory.

Clearly, John the Baptist did not say *I am the greatest.*

Far from it!

John very definitely considered himself to be one of the least.

What John, the precursor, illustrates for us (just like Mary the Mother of Jesus) is that true greatness makes itself manifest in profound humility, lowliness, modesty and true simplicity of heart.

I hear the call addressed to us today as a call to take up the challenge to follow in John's footsteps, which are none other than the footsteps of Jesus Himself.

Paul tells us; *Christ humbled Himself.*

The whole of Scriptural revelation makes it clear that it is in humility that true greatness is best shown forth.

The Christian disciple is called to be, in the words of a responsory sung here at the monastery: *humble before God and men.*

*The greatest man after Christ*, John the Baptist, distinguished himself by his humble attitude of heart.

So much so, we could say that humility is the supreme lesson of his life.

Again and again the point is made in the Bible that the Lord rejects the proud of heart. The attitude of pride is shown from the earliest scenes of the Book of Genesis *to stand before a fall*, to quote the Wisdom writer.

To dare to say these things in today's world is to dare to be counter-cultural.

In today's world the whole emphasis is on pride.

Unhealthy pride could be likened to an epidemic illness that has taken hold of us. Although it is an illness, it is regarded by many as the sign of good health. Pride really is encouraged by today's society.

Has anyone here written or read a CV of late?

Has anyone here heard someone present themselves for an important post recently?

The last thing people will do today is be shy about their gifts, talents and abilities. They are much more likely to exaggerate these than to hold back on them.

No wonder we have ended up with a divided and aggressive society.

It really is *the strongest man or woman wins* mentality that reigns supreme. (The greatest and the best being equated with the one with the most developed *ego*, the one who makes the most noise and is the cheekiest!)

Life is all about self-fulfilment, one's dreams for one's self, attention to one's own aspirations above everybody/anybody else's. It is all about being affluent and successful, whatever the cost of achievement in regard to the quality of human relationships.

People *use* others to get to where they want to get to. Relationships are exploited rather than cherished and treated respectfully. There is little sense of community and mutual support among people.

It is a matter of climbing over others (sometimes walking on them) to get to the top.

A societal illness has taken hold.

We find ourselves in a society that is driven by people with *inflated egos*.

The whole philosophy of many is one of self-promotion, self-importance, self-absorption, self-obsession.

These are attitudes that are encouraged, over and beyond care and consideration for others.

The great heroes pointed out and presented as models are those who are *self-made* men and women (as if one can ever *make oneself!*).

Even in religious circles and in the hearts of those who would claim to hold Christian faith there are dangers in this regard. (Pope Francis diagnosed a whole litany of illnesses at the heart of the Church in his discourse to the Roman Curia at Christmas which is not too far removed from some of the things I have been pinpointing here.)

In an idolatrous world (and dare I say an idolatrous Church) the Blessed Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit has been replaced by that of *I, me and myself*.

What is sometimes presented as respectable *personalism* is often little more than self-centredness, egoism, self-idolatry.

The precursor, John the Baptist, stands in contrast to the kinds of ways of seeing things and living life I have been criticising.

As a *prophet* he has a message from God to speak to us. He is God's spokesperson and not just someone out *to sell* himself and his message.

John clearly saw himself and wanted to be seen by others as simply *the Lord's messenger*.

The message John shares with us is found not only in his recorded words, but also, and above all, in the example of his life.

John illustrates for us (indeed, he embodies for us) God's message that the Lord's blessing manifests itself in humility of life.

Just think of how John deflects from himself and points in the direction of Christ.

He doesn't allow his *ego* to hold the foreground.

He proclaims: *Look there is the lamb of God*.

It is as if John says to his disciples and all those he encounters: *I am not important: Christ is! Follow Him!*

Just think of it. How many Masters (including Spiritual Masters) would be ready to say to their disciples and adepts, leave me and go to another? How many Spiritual Masters are ready to recognise someone else as better than they are?

John's *pride and glory* if I can use that term, is a bit like Paul's *boast* in 2 Corinthians. It is in the Lord!

John is *proud* to be associated with Christ; his *boast and glory* is to be considered to be a friend of the bridegroom.

It is explained to us in the context wherein John is likened to the friend of the bridegroom that it is in this relationship that he finds his joy. His joy stems from his association with the Lord.

Understand me correctly.

In saying all I have said, I am not advocating unhealthy self-deprecation.

It is not that John looks down on himself, nor that we should look down on ourselves!

It is that John does not look at himself at all, in any unhealthy, narcissistic, self-obsessed, self-referential, way.

So much in our pride-driven society actually only serves to increase a disease that runs rampant (and perhaps nowhere more than among those who have given themselves the mission of being saviours of the world, helping others): I refer to the ill of *narcissistic personality disorder*.

This attitude of heart (or is it an illness of the mind?) refers to a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behaviour), a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy.

The last element named there (lack of empathy/lack of sympathy/lack of attention to others) is the tell-tale sign that something is awry in our lives.

It is the sign that we have become self-engrossed, totally wrapped up in our self. It is the sign that we have actually become slaves to our selves: our *false self*, our *super ego*.

Humility, a truly humble appraisal of oneself (one in which one recognises and accepts oneself, as one is, before God) brings freedom from the frantic bondage that comes from and is driven by the ill I have just named.

In contrast to *narcissistic personality disorder* (an ill that binds and debilitates us, an ill that restricts us and stunts our growth), humility liberates us.

Humility frees us from our compulsion to dominate.

It leads us to rejoice, as John did, in Christ.

It leads us to recognise God in people beyond our self.

It leads us to rejoice in others.

With humility comes a sense of inner peace, true happiness: joy!

Humility gives us the courage and strength to accept ourselves for who and what we are, which also means being simple enough to accept who and what we are not and never will be.

John could say: *I am not the Christ!*

If only we could admit to ourselves that we are not God!

Then we would be reflecting something of John's humble spirit and true self-knowledge.

So much of the pain and sadness, grief and distress we encounter in life stems from a false

estimation of ourselves: an unhealthy over-estimation of our self.

John's joy was to recognise Christ for who He was and himself for who and what he was not!

May John's example teach and instruct us today!

May it inform our way of being!

If we get the humility thing right (and that will mean never realising that we have!), then we will bear witness to Christ, before ever needing to utter a word.

Like John, we will point others beyond ourselves: in Christ's direction!

Humble men and women are men and women who are *free under grace*.

I see John the Baptist who is heralded as the *Father of Monks*, as incarnating two graces which the monastic legislators lay great emphasis upon: humility and freedom.

For Benedict humility is at the heart of the monastic experience.

For Augustine, it is freedom under grace.

Both humility and freedom are the fruit of love, of course.

That is ultimately what every human being longs for and seeks after.

If we are seen to be humble men and women, free men and women, others will start looking for what we have found in Christ: love which is the source of life!

Amen!