

The Nativity of St John the Baptist
(Isaiah 49:1-6 / Luke 1:57-66.80)
24.06.2020

Today we celebrate the birthday of St John the Baptist who had for mission to point others in the direction of Christ. The Scripture readings of the day draw attention to John's quite unique role in the Christian story. Many who questioned what the child born to Zechariah and Elizabeth would turn out to be at the time of his birth would come to see how *the hand of the Lord was with him*. Others still, among them those who had initially been John's own disciples, would come to grasp John's very privileged place in their lives to be just a *passing one*, for he would point them beyond himself to Jesus, saying: *Behold, there is the Lamb of God... He is the One who takes away the sin of the world... Leave me... Go, follow Him!*

Both the text from Isaiah and the Gospel passage heard this morning make a point that the faith journey of John began from his very conception in the womb. That is also true for each one of us, of course. It is important that we come to realise it.

While the Bible's proclamation of who and what the person of John was is very important for us to appreciate, perhaps what is more important still for us to grasp who and what we are and who and what we are called to be by our whole way of life.

For today I want to propose a very simple and yet, I believe, a very profound exercise. It is to consider our own calling in life: who and what we are, who and what we are called to be by our whole way of life.

Who and what we are.

We are, all of us, God's chosen. Each and every one of us has been/is called and chosen by God, and this since even before our birth – whatever the date in our lives we eventually came to realise this truth.

Who and what we are called to be by our whole way of life.

We are all of us called to be witnesses to Christ; that's to say, called to point others in His direction.

It should be said that for us, who come after the time of Jesus, pointing others to Christ will mean making Him manifest in our lives by our whole way of being.

Let's return to a consideration of John the Baptist and apply to our lives what we can learn from the examination of his life.

Clearly, John was a major figure from the outset. In John's Gospel we are told that large crowds followed him before Christ came on the scene.

All the Gospel accounts agree on the fact that Jesus Himself went to see John on the Banks of the Jordan where he was baptising.

John was considered to be a prophetic figure – someone who spoke a word from God that the people needed to hear. His prophetic word was a call to repentance. It spoke of a fresh start, a new beginning, for God's People.

From the outset we are told that John knew that he was not the Messiah; he clarified people's thoughts on this point. He declared quite openly: *I am not the Messiah*. He spoke of *the One who would come after him*. When Jesus appeared on the scene, John made it clear that He

was the One whom God had sent. On the banks of the Jordan, John had witnessed the dove descend upon Jesus and had heard the Father declare of Him that He was God's *Beloved Son*.

When a degree of confusion arose among God-fearing people who were not quite sure *who was who and what was what*; whether or not they should listen to or follow John's teaching or Jesus' preaching; whether or not they should receive John's baptism or that conferred by Jesus, John had no difficulty about situating himself in a position of humility before Jesus. He had no hesitation about pointing beyond himself to Jesus, the Messianic figure emerging, who was being recognised as *God's Anointed* by the People. In this respect, John proved himself to be a true and godly leader. Those who had been confided to him, John saw as just that: people who had been confided to him for a time. The quality of John's leadership was proven by his willingness to step back to allow God's Anointed One who had appeared on the scene to take His full and rightful place. It is surely quite an extraordinary thing that John did not allow jealousy or envy interfere in his way of being. The Baptist did not allow himself to be swayed by the popularity of Jesus. He did not set himself up in competition to Jesus in any way. In all this John appears as a humble man.

It is also striking to see how John in stepping back also steps forward in a way. He steps forward by explaining his intimate, quite extraordinary relationship to Jesus. He declares of himself that he is *the friend of the bridegroom* – Christ! John's answer to those who asked him to situate himself and give his opinion in regard to Jesus could not be any clearer: *No one can receive anything except what he has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah', but I have been sent ahead of Him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears Him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.* For John, Jesus has the bride, that is *God's People*. Christ is *the bridegroom*. As I have said, in those lines if John steps back, he also steps forward. He declares: *I am not the Messiah*, but he adds that he has a privileged status in regard to the Messiah, when he speaks of himself as *the bridegroom's friend*. And then, staying humble and at his place, he adds immediately: *He must increase and I must decrease*. That last little line merits all our attention. It is really remarkable.

John's punchline – if I can call it that, describes his whole ministry. Before whatever he might have been called to do to make Christ known, this line shows us how the Baptist understood himself: who and what John understood himself to be, in the Lord's eyes and in the eyes of others. John saw himself as *the Lord's servant*, as one *called to bear witness to the light* – not the light himself, but *only a witness to the light*.

We know all the other sayings of John that substantiate what he said here. I won't quote them all. I think, just by way of example, of what he said about *not being worthy to undo Jesus' sandal-strap*.

John's clear vision of who and what he was stemmed from his equally clear vision of who and what Jesus was.

I am sure we could all learn much from John in this respect.

In our moments of pride and arrogance – and we all have such moments – we may have surprised ourselves, by hearing ourselves say to others, or, at the very least thinking within ourselves in our imaginary conversations with others: *Do you know who I am? Do you know what I am?* When we resort to this manner of reasoning we are thinking in terms of our self-importance; thus, we manifest that we are prisoners of what Pope Francis calls our *self-referential tendency*.

The call addressed to us is to refer to Jesus within ourselves... and to refer all others around us to Him. It is to deflect from ourselves; to point beyond ourselves.

John realised that his mission was not to draw attention to himself, but to point others to Jesus. For us to grasp that this is our mission also.

Who and what we are... who and what we are called to be is simply this: witnesses to Christ... and this by our whole way of being. Our purpose in life is to point to someone else. Our purpose is not to promote ourselves, to push ourselves forward, to push ourselves to the top, to make sure that we are the most followed, the most noticed. Sometimes we measure ourselves in such foolish ways as by obsessions around our following on Facebook or Twitter or how many invitations we receive – and to where and with whom! Our obsession can be to walk the corridors of power – if only because we can count ourselves in the company of those who wield it. We might not have the power ourselves, but we can revel in frequenting those who have it – at least, whom we consider (sometimes mistakenly) as having it.

We must remember that the One with whom John aligned himself with, Jesus, considered Himself to be nothing other than *the Lord's* Servant: His poor Servant at that! Worth noting is that Jesus was considered by others to be simply *the Son of Joseph and Mary, the carpenter from Nazareth*, an itinerant preacher who kept company with ordinary folk.

Like John the Baptist we all have for specific calling in life to make Christ known. May we consent to that mission! May we point others to Christ!

There is no better way for us to point others to Christ than by reflecting Him to others in our way of being. May we be graced to do just that.