

Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist
June 24, 2018

Readings: Isaiah 49:1-6; Acts 13:22-26; Luke 1: 57-66 (Day)

In the Catholic tradition, most feast days coincide with the day on which a particular saint died. That might sound odd; however one's death was seen as the day of entrance into eternal life, one's birthday into heaven. It makes good theological sense. Today's feast is one of the rare exceptions to that common practice.

While August 29th is commemorated as the day of his death, St. John the Baptist also has a rare feast of a birth as well. He gets two feast days. The only other birthday celebrations are that of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Sept. 8th) and, Jesus on December 25th. He is in very good company!

This is an incredibly pro-life Feast, as our first reading predicted: "The LORD called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name." This is one of four "servant of the Lord" poems in Isaiah. More important is the description of the mission of the servant. In the early Church and throughout Christian tradition, these poems have been applied to Christ.¹

Any mother present in this Church today recalls the dreams she had for her child while in the womb. It is a wonderful, yet difficult time before giving birth. A beautiful time of dreams, hopes, with some fear and uncertainty mixed in, but above all a time for trust.

I look forward to our monthly blessing for expectant mothers; I borrowed the tradition from Nativity Parish, my home parish. As I have grown older, the gesture has grown in meaning. I feel a special bond for those whom I have baptized. Now imagine the bond between Jesus and John the Baptist. It was this reason for which he was chosen, prepared for in the womb, predicted, foreshadowed, and planned in God's providence. Yet, St. John never let his special call change who he was.

¹ Cf. New American Bible, footnote to Isaiah 42:1-4

He was an austere man, a severe man, a serious man. He lived in the wilderness, had a diet that would put any health food advocate to shame. Oh yes, he preached. He preached about repentance, about the need for reformation of lives. He was even mistaken for the Messiah. In all this, he only kept focused on his goal: "He must increase; while I must decrease." (John 1:30) Augustine even found the date of this feast significant.

"So let both their deaths also speak of these two things: "It is necessary for him to grow, but for me to diminish." The one grew on the Cross, the other was diminished by the sword. Their deaths have spoken of this mystery, let the days do so too. Christ is born, and the days start increasing; John is born, and the days start diminishing. So let man's honor diminish, God's honor increase, so that the honor of man may be found in the honor of God."

Sermon # 380

The ancients saw tremendous symbolism in nature, in light and darkness. They noticed the cycles of nature, and paid close attention to them. John pointed towards another. His whole life did; yet without losing his own personality, or in any way diminishing his person.

The Opening Prayer for today's Mass is simply beautiful, employing language that speaks of his role as the one who makes "ready a nation fit for Christ the Lord," directing us "into the way of salvation and peace." May we come to understand that life is a journey, and that God's invitation to "walk in the way of salvation" makes possible for us to live our life for another.

In that process find our own life. The most treasured notes that I have received often thanked me for helping someone else find the importance of Jesus in their life. You pointed the way.

Notice, with St. John the Baptist, if you asked someone *what he did*, almost certainly they would reply that his "claim to fame" was what

he did for another, not what he did for himself. And well it should be. His saintliness lies in the fact that he never lost sight of his purpose on earth; he was a man for others.

Perhaps we need to be reminded the next time we complain about having to do something, even if we feel justified in our complaints. We must remember that the next time we feel someone else received the credit for something we felt belonged to us. Lest we become too haughty of heart, St. John the Baptist brings us crashing back to earth. None of us needs a moment of fame; we need a lifetime of virtuous deeds for one another that help point each of us to an eternity with God.