

## Birth of John the Baptist June 24<sup>th</sup>

John the Baptist is considered so important by the Church that on the rare occasions that his birth, celebrated on June 24<sup>th</sup>, occurs on a Sunday, it takes precedence over the Sunday Mass. This year it replaces the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time. Today's Gospel to which we have just listened is Luke's account of John's birth. I imagine we are all pretty familiar with it, so I will focus instead on the two readings from the Older Testament that have been chosen to provide a setting for the feast.

The First Reading is taken from the Isaiah scroll chapter 49. Isaiah was a prophet in Jerusalem in the eighth century BC. The author of today's reading was writing two centuries later from exile in Babylon. His reflections are included in the Isaiah scroll because they were seen as drawing out the implications of Isaiah's teaching for the Jewish people in exile. It is not difficult to picture the confusion, even the despair, of the exiles. Jerusalem and its Temple had been destroyed, the Promised Land had been lost, and the dynasty of David, in spite of so much hope, had come to an end. Many lost their faith, others searched in vain to find some sense in what was happening to them.

One group tried to put heart into their fellow exiles by recalling what God had done in the history of their people. They heard of the rising power of a Persian king, Cyrus, who was gradually conquering parts of the Babylonian Empire. They saw him as being raised up by God to liberate the exiles. They dreamed of reliving the story of the Exodus, as God, once again, led them out of captivity, back to the Promised Land. They called the exiles to repent, that is, to change their attitude, by renewing their faith in God's purpose in their lives.

Already we can see connections with John the Baptist. The Jews to whom John the Baptist was speaking were not living in exile in the sense of living in a foreign country, but they were feeling exiled from their roots, living as they were under Roman occupation, and their leaders and teachers appeared powerless to make any sense of their situation. Like the disciples of the prophet Isaiah, John called his contemporaries to put their trust in God. He saw the crisis of the time as an opportunity for God's kingdom, God's reign, to be realised. He was convinced that God's instrument to bring this about, God's Messiah, was already present among them. Their liberation was at hand.

To dramatize his message, John took the people to the eastern side of the Jordan River, Gentile territory, and then led them through the river, just as their ancestors had crossed the Red Sea and then the Jordan. He led them to the west bank. They were being called to take back the Promised Land. He was not suggesting that they could do this on their own. They, like the contemporaries of the author of today's First Reading, were to put their trust in God, who required of them that they repent by renewing their trust in God and being faithful to the covenant. The writers of the exile saw Cyrus as God's instrument in freeing his people. John pointed to Jesus whom he saw as the longed for Messiah. They would find freedom IF they listened to Jesus and followed him.

Today's First Reading points ahead to the all-embracing vision of Jesus: 'It is not enough for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel. I will make you the light of the nations, so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the world'. Jesus'

heart is the heart of God, it is 'Catholic' in the best sense of that word: all-embracing. Jesus has complete trust in the God he called 'Abba' – 'my own dear Father'. He knew God's immense love for every human being, and he wanted to harness for God all the energies of love in his home province of Galilee, throughout Judea and, indeed, to the ends of the world.

What might all this mean to us? It seems to me that we, too, are living in circumstances that have some parallels in the world of the Exile and the world of John the Baptist. Many of us have witnessed the miraculous new life that characterised the Church thanks to the Second Vatican Council. John O'Malley SJ, the finest contemporary historian of Vatican II writing in the English language has provided us with 'a simple litany' of the changes in church style indicated by the council's vocabulary: 'from commands to invitations, from laws to ideals, from threats to persuasion, from coercion to conscience, from monologue to conversation, from ruling to serving, from withdrawn to integrated, from vertical and top-down to horizontal, from exclusion to inclusion, from hostility to friendship, from static to changing, from passive acceptance to active engagement, from prescriptive to principled, from defiant to open-ended, from behaviour modification to conversion of heart, from the dictates of law to the dictates of conscience, from external conformity to the joyful pursuit of holiness.'

Having seen the Church, guided by the Spirit of Jesus, dare to embrace the world, we find ourselves in a system that, as an institution, appears to have lost courage and to be retreating. There is still immense love-energy in the Church, but we sense that the institution, as an institution, needs a radical reform, so that we will listen to each other better, listen to the world, and dare to believe in the energies of love that are all around us.

And this is a personal message to each of us. Luke tells us that the birth of John the Baptist brought great joy to his family and community. Isn't this true of every birth? It was true of yours and of mine. The people wondered 'What will this child become?' They asked the same question about you and me. They knew that the key to the answer was, in the words of Luke, that 'the hand of the Lord is with him'. The hand of the Lord is with you and with me, and with the Pope and Cardinals and the Roman Curia. Each of us, in our own way, is called to listen intently to the movements of grace in our life. The author of today's Reading did, and he dared to challenge his contemporaries in exile to renew their hope. John the Baptist did and he faithfully carried out his challenging mission. We are all called to do no less.

John gives us the key: he pointed to Jesus. We are Jesus' disciples, called to walk the road that Jesus walked. If each of us did that, then the reform so needed in the Church would happen. The Church would not be broken down by division, it would be built up in a communion of love in which everyone's gift was appreciated and welcomed. The change would come only from love, courageous love, self-giving love, grateful love. The name 'John' means 'God's grace'. In this Year of Grace, he reminds us of the infinite grace that is being poured out on our world, poured out in the hearts of each of us. God needs you, God needs me, God needs each of us in our own way to dare to let Jesus live in us, whatever the cost.

Jesus said to Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world. True. But it is a kingdom FOR this world, a kingdom of all-embracing, 'Catholic', love. Today's feast, celebrating the birth of the great prophet who introduced Jesus, reminds us of the sacred event that is every birth, and encourages us to penetrate our own heart and our own lives, praying to hear the call God is

giving us, so that each of us will contribute to the reforming of the wonderful Church into which we were baptised.