

## **Birthday John the Baptist**

There are few Sundays when we celebrate the feast of one of the saints. In a few weeks' time we will again celebrate the feast of a saint. It will be Mary Magdalen's turn to be honoured. John the Baptist is the only saint whose birth and death are celebrated as feast days.

Today we remember the moment when Elizabeth gave birth to her son, the one who would prepare the way for Jesus.

John's parents Zechariah and Elizabeth are described by Luke as being "worthy in the sight of God, and scrupulously observed all the commandments and observances of the Lord. But they were childless; Elizabeth was barren, and they were both getting on in years." When the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah and announced they were to have a son, Zechariah found it very hard to believe what was promised.

But John was to be no ordinary child. "Even from his mother's womb he will be filled with the Holy Spirit and will bring back many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah, he will go before him to turn the hearts of fathers towards their children, preparing for the Lord a people fit for him."

In our readings for this Mass we see that John's role is described in the words of the servant song from the Prophet Isaiah. "The Lord called me before I was born, from my mother's womb he pronounced my name." The prophet hears God say to him; "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 the ends of the earth.". That reading from Isaiah is a beautiful one for us to try to apply to ourselves. The Lord called each of us before we were born. God pronounced our name even before our parents had decided what they would call us. God formed us in the womb to share in the mission of Jesus.

That John the Baptist was to have a very special role to play in the plan of God's salvation was sensed by the people who witnessed the circumstances of his birth. That Zechariah had been struck dumb for not believing what the angel had promised was one sign that they noticed. When he wrote that his name was to be John, he could speak again. People were astonished and began to praise God. They asked the question, "What will this child turn out to be?"

Even as people ask that question, John is beginning to carry out his role of preparing the way for Jesus. He is building up that expectation for what God may want to

do in the hearts of his people. And John continues to do that for each one of us, even today.

We could look to John the Baptist as one who can support us in a time when it seems to be more difficult than usual to be part of the Catholic Church. Not only can John keep reminding us that we need to prepare a way for the Lord to come more fully into our lives. But he can help us to notice some of the many ways that Jesus is already present to us. John stood in the River Jordan and pointed out to the people who had come to be baptised by him that Jesus the Lamb of God was there among them. John can help us to see where Jesus is in our busy lives. He can help us to notice his face in the crowd and to contemplate that face. John can help us to notice the people that Jesus uses to show his face to us. John can help us to recognise those signs of love that assure us that Jesus is near.

I have found it more difficult in the last few weeks to focus on the more positive aspects of who we are as Church and what our mission is. The saints who have gone before us can help us to do just that. This week we celebrated the feasts of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, St. John Fisher and Thomas Moore. Aloysius happily died after catching the plague from the people that he nursed. John Fisher and Thomas Moore were both martyred, but neither of them lost the joy of being servants of the Lord.

John the Baptist was killed because he was God's prophet and could only speak the truth.

The psalm we prayed today is a very beautiful way of remembering how close our God is to us no matter how we may be feeling. "O Lord, you search me and you know me, you know my resting and my rising, you discern my purpose from afar. You mark when I walk or lie down, all my ways lie open to you." Perhaps at times we do not want the Lord to know everything that happens in our lives. But when we begin to understand that God can only see us with the eyes of love, then we welcome God's constant watching over us. In times of prayer we come to understand that God expresses his love for us through the people around us who show their care. They become the face, the hands and the heart of the Lord who loves us. We in our turn are called to become Christ for others.

The birthday of John the Baptist is a great celebration for what God has in store for his people. John came to prepare the way for and make known the one who was to be our saviour. May he continue to open our eyes and our ears so that we may recognise the one who loves us and hear the good news that he speaks to our hearts.