

Sunday 24th June, 2018
The Birth of John the Baptist - Year B

Isaiah 49:1-6
Psalm 139:1-11
Acts 13:22-26
Luke 1:57-66,80

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

It has been said (and perhaps is a common misconception among some Christians still) that in a very simplistic way the Old Testament is all about the story of God, and the New Testament is the story of Jesus. Now, apart from the obvious question of “where is the Holy Spirit then - we do worship a Trinity, not a duity” - this viewpoint fails to recognize the important aspect of Jesus’ Jewish roots; roots that have been forged in the stories and relationship between God and God’s chosen people, the Hebrew Nation.

One of the important mentors in my journey to Ordination, Bishop John Bayton, was fond of saying - “you will never understand Jesus and the Gospels until you understand his Jewish origins and the Hebrew Scriptures”. It is not possible to consider the two testaments of our Scriptures in isolation to one another; one only needs to look, for example, at the way in which the Gospel writers use passages of Scripture from Isaiah and the other Prophets and see in Jesus the fulfillment of these prophecies to appreciate the connection.

In all of this I see a relationship with today’s Feast, that of the Birth of John the Baptist. Because in many ways, John the Baptist provides a link between the Old and the New Testaments. Born to an ancient Priestly family, the Holy Baptist stands at the very end of the Old Testament as a Prophet, but also at the very beginning of the New Testament, heralding the Christ.

That is why he appears at the beginning of the Gospels. He opens up a new way and by his preaching of the Gospel of repentance begins to make a way in people's hearts and lives to receive the ministry of Christ.

Today, however, more than his preaching, we are asked to consider and ponder the moment of his birth; that moment which is in many ways the first chronological event of the New Testament. And what strikes me here regarding the conception of John is the similarity in his story with so many of the faithful men and women of the Hebrew Scriptures. Sarah & Abraham are, we are told, old and barren. And yet God grants them the blessing of Isaac. Isaac himself, with Rebekah, was blessed with Jacob. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, was so distraught by her barrenness that she wept outside the temple, prior to being blessed by God.

And John the Baptist's parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah are "getting on in years", Luke says earlier in Chapter one, and Elizabeth is "barren". In an interaction remarkable for its intimacy, Zechariah encounters God in the Temple, and is told that his wife will conceive. In his disbelief at God's promise he is struck dumb - which is why in today's Gospel he is almost comically gesturing to those around him for a tablet on which to write the name of the child - the name given by God. And once his tongue is freed, his response is to praise God for this great gift.

Barrenness and prophesy are two interconnected themes which permeate the feast of the Baptist's nativity. Elizabeth's barrenness is used by God to reveal God's love for her, but also the entire creation. This divine love, expressed in divine power and glory, enables the cousin of the Virgin to conceive.

The conception and birth of St. John points to the end not only of the physical barrenness of Zachariah and Elizabeth but also prefigures God's promise that Christ will bring an end to the barrenness of Creation as a whole. Sin and death had rendered the creation incapable of nurturing and sustaining life.

For the reign of death, traced back to Adam's fall, threatened life which was destined from all eternity to abide with and in God.

Today we celebrate and bear witness to the unfolding of the creation's renewal now affirmed in the birth of John the Baptist. Previously bound to death, the creation begins to reflect its true identity. From the barrenness of Elizabeth emerges the forerunner of the one who is life. And we celebrate and bear witness to the life promised to us, also; God's created beings.

In pointing the way to he who speaks the word of life - and indeed, in John's Gospel is called no less than *the Word*, John the Baptist encourages us to open our hearts and our minds to the creative power of God - the God whose desire for each one of us is that we should fulfil the potential of our lives.

The Psalmist today reminds us most poignantly that it was God who formed us - "...you knit me together in my mother's womb", he says. We were created for a point and a purpose, and our life's goal in many ways is found in our discovering and growing into this purpose and identity.

Celebrating the nativity of St. John should be an expression of our thanks to God who has delivered us from the barrenness of death, which tries to impair and ultimately smother the creative powers of the mind and heart, given by God. In the joy of this, then, we are urged on by divine love to break through our human limitations.

As members of the body of Christ, we are also endowed with a prophetic calling. We are to proclaim and to show that the barrenness of creation has been filled with life. In the midst of desolation, God has brought John, the greatest of prophets, to prepare the way of the Lord. Like St. John, we are to continue announcing the prophetic word which awakens the creation from the barrenness of sin and brokenness.

Like St. John, we are commissioned to lead an anxious and searching humanity to repentance by which it is drawn into the embrace of the Life Giver.

St. John prepared Israel for the coming of the Messiah. His call to repentance and baptism formed a faithful remnant that awaited the coming of the Messiah. It was this remnant that helped to provide the human component of the Church. Now we are responsible for continuing the call to repentance, which leads to the baptism of water and the Spirit.

This is the baptism that enables humanity to become one with God and with each other. This is the act which compels us, as faithful followers of the Word, by our lives and by our actions to proclaim this good news.

The feast of John the Baptist's birth affirms the victory of regenerated and changed life. Here we celebrate new life emerging from the barrenness of sin and death - John's life, the life of the cosmos, and our lives - changed. This is the joyous core of our feast. And in it, we find nothing less than the beginning and end of the Church's mission to and for the world.

The Lord be with you...