

June 24, 2013 Solemnity of the Nativity of John the Baptist

As the one assigned to give the homily on this solemnity, I find consolation in St. Augustine's words on a similar occasion. He said: "...If I find myself incapable of plumbing all the depths of [its mystery] either for lack of time or lack of skill, the Holy Spirit will enlighten you. His voice will make itself heard in your heart, without mine; for he is in your mind and heart, you are his temples." I can now proceed with ease in sharing my limited understanding on so joyous occasion.

The birth of any child has an element of marvel and awe about it. After nine months in the secure dark warmth of the mother's body, it is pushed to come out into the light of day, and begin to breathe on its own and cry its first sound. The mother forgets her birth pangs as she receives the child in her arms and hold it to her breast. The father, family and friends are both proud and relieved when all turns out well for mother and child.

The birth of John the Baptizer had additional awesome elements about it. His imminent conception was announced by an angel, and by the same angel he was given a name, an unaccustomed one. "His name is John." He was born of parents who were past the age of childbearing. We have it on good authority that there is no man born of women greater than he. Even in the womb the child gave an indication that he sensed the presence of the one for whom he was destined to prepare the way.

As he grew up, his devout, priestly father helped him understand that his mission was to be prophetic, to go before the Lord to prepare straight paths and call people to repentance. It was in the spirit and power of Elijah that he was to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the rebellious to the wisdom of the just. By doing that he would fulfill ancient prophecies far in the past history of his people. At a certain age he left home and went to live in the Judean desert. He is silent about what preparation he had there while all alone. When he appeared in public, he was poorly clothed and thin from a sparse diet. So it must have been a harsh life.

His public ministry was apparently brief. He began in the desert calling to any who would listen: Repent because the coming of the kingdom of God is imminent. People instinctively sensed his holiness. Somehow the word got around that he may be a prophet. Soon multitudes were coming to him from all over Judea, to be immersed in the Jordan while they confess their sins as a sign of their repentance. John was stern in his admonitions to those who came to him. You must bear fruits fit for repentance! He told people to share their resources of food and clothing with the poor; he told tax collectors to be honest in what they extracted from citizens; he told soldier to be content with their pay and not use their authority to rob or extort money.

People began to wonder if he was the long-awaited Messiah who would deliver Israel. He denied it, saying, No, I am not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the one like Moses that is to come. The temple authorities soon got wind of all this and sent agents to ask him on what authority he was doing this baptism ritual. He answered them plainly that his baptizing with water was nothing compared with the mightier one coming after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. When Jesus himself came to be baptized in the Jordan, John recognized him and soon was pointing him out to his own disciples: Look, there is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Some left John to become Jesus' disciples.

John got himself into trouble when he accused King Herod of his unlawful marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife while the brother was still living. Herod had John arrested and thrown into prison. Herodias found the opportunity to get John killed. His faithful followers honored his body with proper burial and continued to carry on his practice of baptizing with water.

John the Baptist occupies a most prominent place in salvation history. He came at that junction when the old covenant was to be eclipsed by the new. God gave the law through Moses and Elijah. Grace and truth came through Jesus the Anointed one. The story of John's life is treasured for his faithfully fulfilling the vocation to be the voice crying in the wilderness preparing the way for the Word made flesh in Jesus. He knew that he was not the real light coming into the world, and that when the true light came his own light would diminish as the stars do when the sun comes up. As he himself said: He must increase and I must decrease.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians that God has chosen every child of Adam and Eve in Christ, even before the world began, to be holy and blameless in his sight, to be full of love. Yes, that means each one of us was in God's mind and plan before we were conceived. Our real life is hidden with Christ in God, even while we are still in this world, although not of it. The everyday task is to grow in the womb of God to the full stature of Jesus, the well beloved Son. We are aided by participating in this worship service, this service of praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of his Son and his saints, who give us hope and the courage to be his witnesses by our faithfulness to our vocation. To the All Holy God be praise and glory forever and ever. AMEN