

June 24, 2018 The Solemnity of the Nativity of John the Baptist.
Homily by Fr. Christopher Wyvill at the Cathedral of St. Matthew

Today we solemnly celebrate the birthday of John the Baptist, or Baptizer. The church celebrates only three earthly birthdays, those of Jesus and Mary along with John's today. The celebrations for the rest of the saints are generally for the day of their birthday into eternal life. The three are singled out no doubt because of their central roles in the fullness of time when a Savior was born for us. All three had miraculous conceptions.

The gospel of Luke gives us the detailed narratives of those of John and Jesus. There is nothing about Mary's in the gospels. By an ancient tradition we celebrate her immaculate conception on December 8. It is a fitting recognition of God's special preparation of her to bring his beloved Son into the world. Mary was conceived without sin. Jesus was conceived without man when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary. John was conceived when his parents were well beyond childbearing years.

The role of John the Baptist in God's plan for our salvation is more prominent than that of St. Joseph, foster father of Jesus. By the time John and Jesus began public ministries Joseph's presence is not mentioned in the gospels. Mary was a widow. There are no recorded words of Jesus about his foster father Joseph. But of John he said, "I solemnly assure you, history has not known a man born of woman greater than John the Baptizer." (Mt. 3:30)

John, the apostle and evangelist, wrote about the Baptist: "There was a man named John sent by God, who came as a witness to testify to the light, so that through him all men might believe – but only to testify to the light, for he himself was not the light." All four evangelists tell us something about how John came on the scene calling people to repentance and preparing them for 'the one who is to come after him'. There had not been a recognized prophet sent from God for centuries. John, son of Zachary, a priest of the order of Aaron, did not follow his father's footsteps. His preparation for his mission was in the desert, not in a rabbinic school. By his austerity and his forthright message with its warnings, many saw him as a prophet, some even wondering if he was the Messiah.

When the priests and Levites heard that many people were going to John to be baptized and moved to repentance by his preaching, they questioned him, "Who are you?" Are you Elijah, or a prophet, or the Messiah. He said no. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, he told them "I am a voice in the desert, crying out: Make straight the way of the Lord." (Jn 1: 23). He was the voice. The one coming after him was the Word, the Son of God, who became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

John said he was not worthy to unfasten the sandals of the one coming after him, one who had existed before him. When Jesus came to John for baptism, John objected. He protested, "I should be baptized by you, yet you come to me!" Jesus answered: "Give in for now. We must do this if we would fulfill all of God's demands." (Mt 3:14) At that baptism John saw the Spirit descend on Jesus, the sign that he was indeed the one who was to come who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

People were drawn to John by his evident holiness. Some became his disciples. He taught them how to fast and pray. One day when Jesus walked nearby, John announced to his followers, "There is the Lamb of God." Andrew and another follower went after Jesus and spent the day with him. He told his brother Peter he had found the Messiah. They became his followers. John did not become a disciple of Jesus. His role was to be his forerunner, to go ahead of him and point him out when he came.

When a controversy arose between their followers, some of John's disciples came to him with, "Rabbi, the man who was with you across the Jordan – the one about whom you have been testifying – is baptizing now, and everyone is flocking to him." John reminded them that he said he was not the Messiah. He told them that He Jesus is the groom; I am the best man overjoyed to hear his voice. "He must increase while I must decrease."

John is a model for all of us in his fidelity to his unique calling and his humility. May our celebrating his life inspire us to be faithful to the commitments we have made to God by our baptismal promises. As followers of Christ, members of his body, we also have a commitment to one another under the law of triune love. Love God, and your neighbor as yourself. We must forgive, must pray for our enemies, that they may become friends under the Lordship of Jesus. To him with the Father and the Holy Spirit be praise, honor, glory and ready obedience, now and forever. AMEN