

Birthday of St John the Baptist

At Mass today we celebrate the Birthday of Saint John the Baptist. This is one of the few celebrations in the year deemed of sufficient importance to displace the celebration of a Sunday. Apart from Our Lady his is the only Saint's birthday we keep – normally the Church celebrates only the day of their death – their 'heavenly birthday'. Today's date was fixed by the Council of Nicaea when 25th December was chosen to honour the birthday of Our Lord, since at the Annunciation the Angel told Our Lady that her cousin was six months pregnant. This choice of date was quite deliberate. Jesus was the true light coming into the world, while John's light would fade as he made way for the Messiah. Christmas Day was celebrated on the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. The Birthday of Saint John the Baptist was placed on Midsummer's Day, the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, although there has been slight slippage in some calculations to do with the movement of the sun.

John the Baptist is often described as being a hinge between the eras of the Old and New Testament. Israel's waiting time is coming to an end. Christ will soon replace the old covenant by sealing the new covenant in His blood. A time of uncertain watching and waiting will have been replaced by a new era of Christian faith. John will inaugurate this new era by his preaching. His appearance was striking with his rough clothes, but the Gospels tell us that it was what John said that struck people most. He is described as 'a voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.'

John the Baptist is a new kind of signpost to Christ. Prophecies pointed the way ahead; they shaped Israel's expectations. But it was not until the birth of the voice, as Saint Augustine puts it, that Christ was formally announced to the world. The prophets foretold. When Our Lord and Saint John leapt in their mothers' wombs there was a joyful foretaste. When Zechariah regained his speech, it was a powerful sign. But it is not until the voice of John the Baptist echoes round the desert that Our Lord is formally proclaimed. "I am not the one you imagine me to be; that one is coming after me, and I am not fit to undo His sandal." When John sees Jesus approaching he recognises him as the one who was to come: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

At every Mass, Saint John the Baptist's voice reminds us who Christ really is. We hear these words as we are invited to approach the altar to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion. When the priest shows us the host, we see Christ, the Messiah who summed up Israel's hopes and brought about the salvation God had promised. We see Jesus the suffering servant who took our sins upon Himself and died for us on the Cross. We see the triumphant Saviour rising from death to eternal victory. John the Baptist knew who Our Lord was. John was put to death before he could see his hopes fulfilled but he is now part of the heavenly throng as one of the greatest of saints.

Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist, veiled under the outward signs of bread and wine, but Our Lord also teaches us to see him in the sick and the poor, in our neighbours and friends, in those we love and those we do not. We find this a challenge – so often we lack the imagination to see him. We need that voice of Saint John the Baptist saying "Behold the lamb of God." As we hear this inner voice, may our faith in Our Lord grow deeper within our hearts and help us to recognise this hidden presence as we are sent out from Mass to bear witness by our lives and bring the light of Christ to the dark places of our world.