

## Solemnity of the Nativity of John the Baptist

June 24, 2012

John the Baptist. John is a figure of transition. He belongs to both the Period of Israel and to the Period of Jesus. When John appeared in the region of the Jordan, he was a preacher clothed in camel's hair, the traditional garb of the prophets. He was Isaiah's "voice crying in the wilderness." His message was as stern as his garb and his diet: Repent! The Greek word means "change your mind," "change your thinking," "turn around," "return," "be converted." John preached a reform designed to prepare the Jews for the coming of the Messiah.

Stern yes, but humane as well. No profession is denied salvation – not the tax collector, not the soldier. What is demanded is that they act justly and reveal love. And always, everywhere, "he who is mightier than I is coming." Always, "he must increase, I must decrease". Just as the birthday of Jesus was fixed at December 25, the time of the winter solstice after which the days *grow longer*, so John the Baptist's birthday was fixed at June 24, the time of the summer solstice after which the days *grow shorter*. And, like so many preachers of justice throughout history, John paid a price: imprisonment and death.

This man whom Jesus praised as "a prophet and more than prophet" does not exist in isolation. He recalls his predecessors. What kind of people were the Old Testament prophets? How did they address the people? Five significant qualities. First, the Hebrew prophet is extraordinarily sensitive to evil, to injustice. Second, and in consequence, this man in whose voice God rages, this man shocks. Third, the Hebrew prophet is an iconoclast. He challenges sacred institutions, sacred beliefs, sacred persons. Ezekiel cries: "The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them."

Fourth, the prophet is a man embarrassed, lonely, frustrated. Embarrassed because, while others are predicting peace and prosperity, he threatens disaster and destruction. Lonely because he alienates simply everyone: not only the wicked but the pious, not only cynics but believers, not only princes but priests. Fifth, the prophet's words are charged with divine power because he has experienced God. He has encountered the God of the covenant, involved in history, with a stake in the human situation, intimately affected by human events. He not only hears God's voice. He feels God's heart.

Today's prophet. The word of one inspired by God to speak in God's name. Mull for a moment on each of the five qualities. First, too many of us have lost the sensitivity to evil and injustice that should mark every prophet. Some surely share that sensitivity. But it is usually those who have experienced firsthand the sorry existence of the poor and the imprisoned, the hungry and the downtrodden. Moreover, there is so much evil and injustice in our city and over the globe that we grow used to it. We were shocked when TV first brought war into our living rooms. Second, we should love our sinning, struggling community with a crucifying passion; agonize over our own sinfulness, our failure to be holier than we are. We too are awfully vulnerable, must at times cry out, "Lord, help my unbelief."

Third, the Christian, like the Hebrew prophet, must prove a challenge to the community. I mean that our task, in part, is to shatter false images, destroy idols. That some of these parade in the cloak of the sacred – institutions, beliefs, persons – only makes our task more delicate. It does not remove responsibility. The shepherds, whether pope or pastor, are servants. Priests and bishops too are summoned to conversion. My words are directed in the first instance to my own life. But institutions that call for challenge are not only churches. They include those attitudes, life styles, and ways of acting that mark our culture as less than Christian. I mean, for example, individualism and hedonism that is conquering our culture and even our Catholicism.

Fourth, the genuine prophet must listen. I have to hear what God says to me: in the word I read on the sacred page, in the word God speaks to me in the depths of my heart, in the voices of the world around me. I must struggle with that word. Fifth, our lives must be charged with divine power, because we have experienced God. A God intimately involved in history – in our history. A God whose pulsing image is every one of us. A God who *became* one of us.

A final word. Like John, we too are called to “go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” Two thoughts pertinent for our lives as parishioners: the incredible intimacy of prophets like Isaiah and John with their Lord, and their passionate concern for the people. To hear the word, we must love the Lord who speaks it – love with all our strength and spirit. And to live that word ourselves, we must love the Lord’s people with a crucifying passion. Such is the biblical justice that must be etched in our hearts. Only then will we live the mission of Christ Our Hope Church imposed by our baptisms.

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