

## 2018 THE BIRTH OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

On the hierarchy of Saints, John the Baptist is only outranked by the Blessed Virgin Mary. Except for the Mother of God, no one had a greater role to play in the unfolding of our salvation than John the Baptist. Mary's 'Yes' at the Annunciation was essential for the conception of Jesus. John's role in preparing the People of Israel to receive the in-coming Messiah and His dramatic pointing to Jesus, the Carpenter from Nazareth, declaring Him to be that longed-for Messiah were also of crucial importance and is recorded in all the Gospels.

John's mission began before he was even born. When Mary came to stay with John's mother, Elizabeth, the infant John leapt in his mother's womb, signaling the presence of the Messiah in the womb of Mary. Thirty years later John, now the greatest of all the Prophets, pointed to Jesus, the Carpenter of Nazareth, and said: "Behold the Lamb of God, behold He who will take away the sin of the world."

As a rule the Church celebrates the Feast of a Saint on the anniversary of the Saint's death. However in the case of St John the Baptist, we celebrate his birth as well as his death. This is the Church's way of echoing the words of Jesus: "Among those born of women, no one is greater than John the Baptist."

The Gospel story of the birth of John the Baptist focuses on the Naming Ceremony which took place in the house of Zachariah and Elizabeth eight days after John's birth.

The naming of a child was an important ritual in Israel. Customarily it involved far more than just the parents sitting down to work out a name. Extended family and neighbours would be involved. Eight days after the birth they would meet to try to reach an agreement on the most appropriate name for the child. The name would indicate the hope they had for the child. And so the people of Ein Karem decreed that the baby boy should be called 'Zachariah'. They saw it to be John's destiny to carry on the bloodline and the ministry of his father, the respected priest, Zachariah.

However God had already intervened. Even before the baby had been conceived, God, through the Archangel Gabriel, had instructed Zachariah to name the child 'John'.... a name which means 'God is Gracious'. God hereby indicated that the purpose of the child's life would be to announce God's gracious outreach to humanity in the coming of the Messiah. Zachariah with the use of a writing tablet made clear the divine instruction.

For God had a purpose and plan for John even before John was conceived. The words of Isaiah in the First Reading apply especially to John the Baptist: “The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb He named me- He formed me in the womb to be His servant.”

John’s destiny was made very clear in the prophetic words of his father Zachariah- words now enshrined in the Morning Prayer of the Church: “ As for you child, you shall be called a prophet of God, the Most High. You shall go ahead of the Lord to prepare His ways before Him- to make known to His people their salvation through forgiveness of their sins, the loving kindness of the heart of our God Who visits us like the dawn from on high.”

I believe that the Naming Ceremony for John the Baptist gives a clear message to all of us that God creates every person with a destiny in mind for that person. I think that John Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher, was utterly wrong when he said that people come into the world without a purpose and that by exercising their freedom they create a purpose for themselves. I believe that nothing in creation is random... that there is a divine plan behind the creation of every person and everything.

Not all Catholics believe this. This morning at Men’s Group I said that I believe that I was destined to be the Parish Priest of St. Mary Star of the Sea in 2018 from before I was conceived. I believe that serving you is part of the reason God created me. Some of the Group saw this as a ridiculous way of thinking. And maybe it is; but it sure helps me.

I believe it is important that each of us takes time to ponder prayerfully, working to discover the purpose for which God created us and to respond to God’s Will with an absolute generosity of spirit.

Frequently this will demand that we walk to a different drumbeat from what people expect. Certainly it meant that for John. Following God’s purpose required that he live in the desert dressed in rough animal skins, eating wild honey and locusts, living an arduous existence; all the while reflecting and praying. And then, at the appropriate time- responding to God’s call to be God’s voice- it meant exhorting the People of Israel to prepare themselves for the coming of the Promised One and fearlessly confronting them with the reality that their sinfulness could blind their eyes and shut their ears to the truth of the Messiah when He came.

John is a model in his readiness to respond to God’s dreams for him.

What are God’s dreams for you?

Carey Landry had it right in his hymn “Only a Shadow”:

“The dreams I have today, my Lord,  
Are only a shadow of your dreams for me,  
Only a shadow of *what* may be  
If I but follow You.”

Our eternal greatness is dependent upon whether or not we have the courage of John the Baptist - to embrace God's dreams for us and live them out- with all the ardour of our souls.