

Birth of Saint John the Baptist

June 24

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

A cousin of Jesus, Saint John had the unique office of forerunner of the Messiah; an office which had been foretold in the Old Testament (Malachi 3:1). John began to fulfill this office in the desert of Judea, on the banks of the Jordan. Clothed in skins, reminiscent of Elijah, he announced to all men the obligation of washing away their sins with the tears of sincere penitence, and proclaimed the Messiah, who was about to make His appearance among them. He admonished all to charity and a reformation of their lives, and those who came to him in these dispositions he baptized in the river. The Jews practiced religious washings of the body as legal purifications, but no baptism before that of John had so great and mystical a significance. It chiefly represented the manner in which the souls of men must be cleansed from all sin to be made partakers of Christ's spiritual kingdom, and it was an emblem of the interior effects of sincere repentance; a type of that sacrament of baptism which was to come with our Lord. So noteworthy was this rite in Saint John's ministrations that it earned for him even in his own lifetime the signifying name of "the baptizer."

As we read the story of John's conception and birth, the motifs of the child of aged parents, the announcement of the birth by an angel, and the divinely chosen name echo the narratives of Abraham, Isaac, Samson and Samuel.

1st Reading - Isaiah 49:1-6

Our first reading for today is the beginning of the second suffering servant song of Isaiah. Although these songs are usually applied to the Messiah, here the depiction could easily also be that of the one who is to announce the coming of the Messiah.

49:1 Hear me, O coastlands, listen, O distant peoples. The LORD called me from birth,

God sets His chosen ones on the way of their vocation even before their birth. The narrative account of the annunciation of John's birth (Vigil of the Birth of John the Baptist) states that this was true for John (Luke 1:15). It was also true for Jesus (Luke 1:31).

from my mother's womb he gave me my name.

This was true for John (Luke 1:13) and Jesus (Luke 1:31).

² He made of me a sharp-edged sword

Literally, “He made my mouth a sharp-edged sword” (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 5:12). He is given the gifts of a prophet, the ability to proclaim the word of God.

and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. He made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me. ³ You are my servant, he said to me, Israel, through whom I show my glory.

This particular verse appears to be addressed not to an individual, but to the nation of Israel; the nation which became God’s servant, rather than His child, because of the sin of the golden calf. Prior to the golden calf, God had declared that “Israel is my first-born son” (Exodus 4:22) and as the first-born, Israel had the responsibility to give the proper example to all the other nations. Like the prodigal son, there is always hope that Israel will repent, return and be restored to the family.

⁴ Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength, Yet my reward is with the LORD, my recompense is with my God.

The servant learns to seek his reward with God, rather than gauging the effectiveness of his work through human appearance (see 1 Corinthians 4:1-5) or seeking the glory for himself

⁵ For now the LORD has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, That Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him; And I am made glorious in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength! ⁶ It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

God encourages the servant by extending his mission “to the ends of the earth” (Genesis 12:3; Acts 1:8; 13:47).

2nd Reading - Acts 13:22-26

Our second reading for today comes from Saint Paul’s discourse in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia. Saint Paul is providing a survey of history which shows that Jesus is from the kingly line of David and is therefore the fulfillment of all the Jewish prophecies. In looking at the historical perspective, there are three distinct periods which can be described in the history of the world: (1) the period of Israel, which extends from creation to Saint John the Baptist; (2) the period of Jesus, which encompasses the three years of His public ministry (from John the Baptist to the ascension); and (3) the period of the Church, from the ascension until the end of time.

[In those days, Paul said:] ²² “[God] raised up David as their king; of him he testified, ‘I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will carry out my every wish.’

David is a “type” of Jesus as well as His ancestor.

²³ From this man’s descendants God, according to his promise, has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus.

This is the main proclamation to the Jews.

²⁴ John heralded his coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel; ²⁵ and as John was completing his course,

This indicates the end of the period of Israel and the beginning of the period of Jesus.

he would say, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.’ ²⁶ “My brothers, children of the family of Abraham, and those others among you who are God-fearing,

Gentiles sympathetic to Judaism

to us this word of salvation has been sent.”

Gospel - Luke 1:57-66, 80

This is Saint Luke’s account of the birth of John the Baptist; an account which closely parallels his account of the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1-20).

⁵⁷ When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her.

In the Bible, God’s omnipotence is most clearly revealed by the extent of His mercy.

⁵⁹ When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child,

Leviticus 12:3 requires circumcision on the eighth day. By being circumcised, the child bears the mark which indicates that they are part of the covenant people of God. The ceremony of circumcision was a climactic moment when God and his people are covenanted in the perfect fulfillment of the promises on God’s part and the perfect observance of the Law on Israel’s part.

they were going to call him Zechariah after his father,

Naming a boy after his father was a custom in Israel at this time.

⁶⁰ but his mother said in reply, “No. He will be called John.” ⁶¹ But they answered her, “There is no one among your relatives who has this name.” ⁶² So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called. ⁶³ He asked for a tablet and wrote, “John is his name,” and all were amazed.

The name which had been given by the angel Gabriel in 1:13. The name means “Yahweh has shown favor,” a name which symbolizes the role of Saint John in the redemptive plans of God.

⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God.

The canticle of Zechariah is given in verses 67-79, omitted in today’s reading.

⁶⁵ Then fear came upon all their neighbors, and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, “What, then, will this child be?”

The people’s question prepares the reader for the future – a common stylistic device of Saint Luke.

For surely the hand of the Lord was with him. ⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel.

It is possible that as a young boy Saint John was entrusted to the Essenes at Qumran.