

## THE NATIVITY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST 24<sup>TH</sup> JUNE

John the Baptist is a very important figure in the gospel story preparing for and introducing the Messiah to the Jewish people, and, he has been greatly honoured and revered throughout the history of the Church. Today's gospel reading is Luke's account of John's birth and how he received his name to the astonishment of all those who witnessed his circumcision. In the first reading the words of the prophet Isaiah are aptly applied to John's calling and mission. In the second reading, from the Acts, Paul proclaims Jesus as the promised descendant of King David, and tells us how John, Jesus' herald, announced Jesus' coming.

The **First Reading** comes from the prophet Isaiah. He was one of the major prophets in Israel but the book which bears his name, is not all his work. The reading today comes from the second part of the book, chs.40-55 (Second Isaiah), the work of an unnamed writer, a disciple of Isaiah. This part of the book covers a period of Jewish history 200 years after Isaiah's day when Jerusalem has fallen and the nation is in exile in Babylon. Cyrus, the instrument of God, is about to come and overpower the Babylonian Empire and be the means by which the Israelites are able to return, a new Exodus. Embedded in the book are four passages called the 'Songs of the Servant of Yahweh.' They depict a perfect servant of God who is the light of the nations and gathers in God's people. He is one who preaches the true faith, who expiates people's sins by his own death and is glorified by God. This part of the book, in contrast with the first which is for the most part threatening, is far more consoling as the opening words announce, "Console my people, console them, says your God."

The reading, 49.1-6, is from the second of the 'Songs of the Servant of Yahweh.' The four songs depict a mediator of salvation who is yet to come. They have been given a messianic interpretation and indeed Jesus applied the servant's sufferings to himself and his mission. The early Christian Church saw Jesus as the perfect Servant foretold by Isaiah. Today these words are adapted to John the Baptist, his message goes out not only to the Jewish people but to all 'distant peoples.' Certainly John's name was given him on the day of his conception (Lk.1.13) by the angel of the Lord. John preached fearlessly and many heeded his word, and through John's words the glory of God, Jesus, was made manifest. Perhaps at times, as we all do, John felt he had 'exhausted himself for nothing, to no purpose' but God is always with us. Certainly John was formed in the womb to be God's servant, to introduce Jesus who was to be the means by which Israel, Jacob, was restored to God. Truly John has received honour in God's eyes, he is God's servant and has helped 'to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel', and may be said to be a light to all nations helping God's 'salvation reach the remotest parts of the earth.'

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 138.1-3,13-15, is in praise of God who knows everything about me, a good response to the first reading and the whole life of John the Baptist. It can surely be said that John would have applied this psalm to his life. God knew John, his every thought, word and deed, he knew him from the moment of his conception, and John held no secret from the one who was to come after him and is more powerful than John.

The **Second Reading** is from Acts of the Apostles. This New Testament book is part two of a history of the rise of Christianity, the first part being the gospel according to Luke. They became separated when, about 150 A.D., Christians wanted the four gospel accounts bound together in one volume. The author, Luke, is a Syrian from Antioch, a doctor of non-Jewish origin, who was a close friend of Paul accompanying him on his second and third missionary journeys. Luke collected a great deal of evidence from a variety of sources which he edited. The book deals with the primitive Jerusalem community under Peter's leadership, the spread of Christianity to Samaria, to the gentile peoples and the early days of Christianity in Antioch. From chapter 13 Luke deals with Paul's three missionary journeys and ends with Paul a prisoner in Rome.

The reading, 13.22-26, is part of Paul's preaching to the Jews in the synagogue in Perga, on the southern coast of Pamphylia, present day Turkey, during his first missionary journey. After passages from the Law and prophets had been read, the synagogue president invited Paul to address the congregation. We have just three verses of the address. Paul takes his listeners back in their history to the time they were slaves in Egypt, how God made them into a great people there, and powerfully led them out of Egypt and brought to the Promised Land where they were ruled by Judges until God gave them a king, Saul. But God deposed him and raised up David, here our reading begins. David was the king to carry out God's whole purpose. This 'purpose' of God has been fulfilled in Jesus, our Saviour 'who was heralded by John when he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the whole of the people of Israel.' Our reading ends with John's words saying he is about to be followed by someone much greater than he is. Read the whole of Paul's homily if you have time, 13.13-41.