

## Nativity of John the Baptist – (Year B) – June 24, 2018

IS 49:1-6; PS 139:1B-3, 13-14AB, 14C-15; ACTS 13:22-26; LK 1:57-66, 80

Let's listen **again** to some specific verses from today's **Readings**...but let's listen to them as *Catholics*.

Not as “**conservative**” or “**traditional**” Catholics.

Not as “**liberal**” or “**progressive**” Catholics.

**Just**—as Catholics—*faithful Catholics*—who are **open** to...and *docile* to...the **Truth of God's Holy Word** in the **Sacred Scriptures**.

As you listen to these verses, ask yourself: “What **obvious Truth** do these passages reveal?”

Let's begin with the **1<sup>st</sup> Reading** from the **Prophet Isaiah**:

*Before birth the LORD called me, from my mother's womb he gave me my name.* (Isa 49:1)

And **four verses** later...

*For now the LORD has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb...* (Isa 49:5)

Now let's turn to the **Responsorial Psalm** which comes from **Psalm 139**:

*You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb. I praise you, because I am wonderfully made...My very self you know...Your eyes saw me unformed; in your book all are written down; my days were shaped, before one came to be.* (Ps 139:13, 16)

**John the Baptist** had been born in the **extraordinary circumstances**. Our Gospel today describes some of the details of that extraordinary birth:

*...fear came upon all their neighbors, and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea. All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, “What, then, will this child be?” For surely the hand of the Lord was with him.* (Lk 1:65-66)

The neighbors—astounded as they were from what they had seen and heard—had not been privy to the *earlier* words of the **Angel Gabriel** to **Zechariah**—John the Baptist’s **father**.

Jumping back to earlier verses in this same **Chapter of Luke’s Gospel**, we discover just how *surely the hand of the Lord was with* (cf. Lk 1:66) **John the Baptist** even *before* his birth:

*...the angel said to...Zechariah... “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John...he will be great in the sight of [the] Lord...He will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb, and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people fit for the Lord.”* (Lk 1:13-17)

So, now we can ask ourselves: What is the **main** message—the common *thread*—running through these passages in today’s **Readings**?

What do these passages tell us about **God’s view** of the **human person**—each human person—even **before birth**...even **before conception**?

**Clearly**, that each human being is **willed and intended by God**—even **before** being *conceived*!

Now, for a person who is **comfortable** with this **Scriptural truth**—namely that each child is willed and intended by God with a special purpose—that person should **nevertheless** ask himself or herself:

Would *I* ever **actually** speak up for the dignity and value of unborn children— at **work**, at **school**, or in **another social situation**— where I might be opposed by individuals who *don't* think **an unborn child** is *worth* protecting?

What kinds of feelings emerge inside me **right now** when I imagine myself speaking such truth to those who **reject** such truth?

**Fear?**

Concern about my **reputation**?

After all, one of the reasons we honor **John the Baptist** is precisely because of his **utter faithfulness** to God's law, and **utter fearlessness** to speak the **truth**, even to those who **could**— and *did*— **punish** him for speaking it.

On the other hand, if a person is **uncomfortable** with the Scriptural truth expressed here about the **incalculable value of each unborn boy or girl**, such a person should ask himself or herself:

What thoughts or feelings are stirring in my heart *right now* as I hear **God's Word** about the importance of each unborn child to his **Fatherly Heart**?

Am I tempted to **change the subject** to some *other* issue, so I don't have to admit that **I disagree with God** about the value of each and every human being he's created, including those who are still in their mother's womb?

Am I quickly formulating arguments about *other* issues in my head **right now**— "*Well, what about this issue? ... Well, what about that issue?*"— so I don't have to think about what **that little life in the womb** really *is*?

When the **Old Testament** verses from today's **1<sup>st</sup> Reading** and **Psalms** were first written, **John the Baptist** had not yet been *conceived* in his mother's womb.

But these **Old Testament** verses clearly *point* to John, and his **God-given mission** to proclaim **God’s plan of salvation**.

At the same time, these Old Testament verses also reveal the truth of the value of **every** human being—that each is **willed and intended by God** for a **particular purpose—a particular mission**—in this life.

God had a *particular mission* for **John the Baptist**—*forming John as his servant from [his mother’s] womb* (cf. Isa 49:5)—and John carried out that mission **fearlessly and faithfully** to the **last moment** of his **earthly life**—which is precisely why **he is one of only three individuals** in Christian history—the others being **Jesus and Mary**—whose *birthdays* are celebrated by the Church!

While our **Gospel** today spoke of the **infant John’s future** as a prophet, our **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** today—from the **Acts of the Apostles**—situates us in the midst of **John’s public ministry** many years later where it says:

*John heralded [the] coming of Israel’s savior—Jesus] by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel...* (Acts 13:24)

John the Baptist was utterly committed to his mission—no matter **who** the audience. For instance, he confronted the **respected religious leaders** for their **superficial religiosity** with some very strong words in the **Gospel of Mark**:

*...when [John the Baptist] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Mk 3:7-10)*

Not exactly “welcoming” huh?

At least not by **today's definition** of “*welcoming*”, which most often means accepting not just the **person**, but also *celebrating the person's sin* so as not to **offend** them.

But John was more interested in seeing **souls welcomed** into the **Kingdom of Heaven**, than he was interested in being labeled a “**welcoming fellow**” in his ministry by *those who did not want to be challenged to change*. John the Baptist didn't concern himself with being **liked** by the *lukewarm*.

Neither was John was swayed by a **person's prestige** or the **power** they **possessed**. Considering that he was **beheaded** for his **bravery**, the more *pragmatic* among us might have counseled him to be more “**prudent**”, which is just a **cowardly** way of saying:

**“Don't offend anyone...for *any* reason...even if you have to *lie* to be liked!”**

But here again, John was concerned with pleasing God, not **raising his reputation** in the minds of the so-called “**important**” people of his time. So unconcerned was John with a person's status, in fact, that he confronted a **powerful king** who was living in an **adulterous relationship**. The **Gospel of Matthew** tells us:

*Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison, for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because John said to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.* (Mt 14:3-5)

John's mission was to exhort **everyone** he encountered to **repent** (cf. Mt 2:2) and to help them *see* and *follow* the **Lamb of God** (cf. Jn 1:36-37). He didn't **water down** his message based on whether or not that **person** might reject the message, or if it would have negative consequences for *him*.

Can we say the same?

Are we more concerned with pleasing **human beings** than we are with pleasing **God**? Are we more concerned with **saving our skin** than we are with **saving souls**?

A well-respected **Scripture scholar** posed a similar question about **our** courage in **speaking the truth**. In this brief quote, the **commentator** challenges us to consider whether or not we would have **spoken up to defend of John the Baptist**, after John confronted the king. The commentator writes:

“You and I surely feel that if we had been [at King Herod’s party], we would have stood up for John the Baptist, but the truth is: we wouldn’t have. If we had been there, some of us would have said, “His theology is sound, but he’s too *rigid*.” Others of us would have criticized John for lack of *pastoral sensitivity*, or for making the *faith too political*. Still others would have sagely said John should have *accompanied* Herod rather than *rebuked* him. And so the saints are lonely figures, because they stand for truth, and get *persecuted by the bad and abandoned by the good*.”

<http://www.thesacredpage.com/2018/06/birth-of-glorious-failure-nativity-of.html>

Sometimes we might be tempted to **zone out** during Mass when we celebrate feasts like today’s **Solemnity of John the Baptist**, perhaps because we’ve **heard the Readings** so many times before...or because we **don’t think there’s much connection** between **us** and a *locust-and-honey-eating desert dweller who wore animal skins and railed against sin*.

In fact, we may not realize just **how much we do have in common with John the Baptist**—**both** in terms of the **difficult circumstances** in which he found himself, **and** in terms of his **duty to speak the truth** in those difficult circumstances.

John confronted a king who sought to **redefine marriage** and who also had the **power to punish** John.

We too—today—face powerful political forces who seek to **dismantle marriage** and who also possess **the power to silence Christians** from

speaking **uncomfortable truths**...that is, unless we possess the courage of **John the Baptist** to resist.

**St. Bede**—writing almost **14 Centuries** ago, put it perfectly:

**...John [the Baptist] suffered imprisonment and chains as a witness to our Redeemer, whose forerunner he was, and gave his life for him. His persecutor had demanded not that he should deny Christ, but only that he should keep silent about the truth.”**

[http://liturgies.net/saints/johnthebaptist/officeofreadings\\_martyr.htm](http://liturgies.net/saints/johnthebaptist/officeofreadings_martyr.htm)

Is it not the same today?

Our government institutions and our media **don't demand** that we *deny our Faith*. Just that we *hide* it, so as not to **offend** anyone. But **there is a lot more at stake here than hurt feelings**. The very **fate of humanity** hangs in the balance, as we are pressured to **set aside God's law** in favor of the *flavor of the month* vice.

**Sr. Lucia**, the oldest of the three child visionaries to whom **Our Lady of Fatima** appeared, spoke **prophetic words**—many years later **as a nun**—that show just **how** and **why** the fate of humanity hangs in the balance. She wrote:

**“...the final battle between the Lord and the reign of Satan will be about marriage and the family. Don't be afraid...because anyone who operates for the sanctity of marriage and the family will always be contended and opposed in every way, because this is the decisive issue...”**

<https://onepeterfive.com/sister-lucia-final-confrontation-between-the-lord-and-satan-will-be-over-family-and-marriage/>

The **prophetic spirit of John the Baptist** lives on today, even as the *pathetic spirit of the Evil One* still holds sway in our society.

The question for each of **us** today is:

Does the **Spirit of John the Baptist**—the spirit of **uncompromising faithfulness** to God and the spirit of **undaunted courage** to share the truth with those for whom I'm responsible—live on...in **me**?