

Vigil of the Birth of Saint John the Baptist

June 23rd

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 - Jeremiah 1:4-10

Our first reading has as its subject the call of Jeremiah to the office of prophet. This call takes the form of a dialogue between Yahweh and Jeremiah.

[In the days of King Josiah;] ⁴ The word of the LORD came to me thus: ⁵ Before I formed you

The verb translated as "formed," *yasar*, refers primarily to the modeling of pottery. God is depicted as a potter forming His creation in Genesis 2:7-8.

in the womb

After the time of this writing (around 605 B.C.) It became an accepted idea that God Himself forms the young child in its mother's womb; the significance is that God knows man and stands as his unique master from the very first moment of his existence (Job 10:8; Psalm 22:10-11; 71:6; 139:13ff).

I knew you,

The verb translated as "knew," *yada*, does not refer exclusively to an intellectual knowledge; it involves as well an action of the will and sensibility.

before you were born I dedicated you,

The verb translated as “dedicated,” *quadas*, can also be translated as “sanctified” or “consecrated.” The basic meaning is the separation of something or someone for a divine service. Jeremiah is set aside by God for his prophetic mission.

a prophet to the nations I appointed you.

Not just to Israel, but to the neighboring countries as well. Former prophets were also concerned with the neighboring countries for two main reasons: (1) The history of the chosen people was always closely associated with the history of the entire Near East; and (2) The prophets had a keen sense of the ruling power of Yahweh over the universe – He is the God of all history.

⁶ “Ah, Lord GOD!” I said, “I know not how to speak; I am too young.”

He was about 19 or 20 years of age at the time of his calling. As a young man he would have no authority; the people wouldn’t listen to him.

⁷ But the LORD answered me, Say not, “I am too young.” To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak. ⁸ Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD. ⁹ Then the LORD extended his hand and touched my mouth, saying, See, I place my words in your mouth!

Yahweh is responsible for what has to be said; He provides the message and also sustains His messenger. In the prophetic calls of Isaiah (6:7), Ezekiel (2:8-3:3), and Daniel (10:16) a similar ritual is performed on the mouth.

¹⁰ This day I set you over nations and over kingdoms, To root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant.

2nd Reading - 1 Peter 1:8-12

As a basis for the consolation Saint Peter sends to the Christians of Asia Minor, he describes the meaning of their new life received in Christian baptism.

⁸ Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ as you attain the goal of (your) faith, the salvation of your souls.

As they approach the end of their earthly life, they also approach the goal of their Christian existence, the salvation of their souls.

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and investigated it,

The Old Testament prophets are shown as searching for the meaning of the salvation which God was announcing with them. Saint Peter then goes on to disclose this meaning.

¹¹ investigating the time and circumstances that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the glories to follow them.

As we saw in our first reading, the prophets spoke because of the indwelling of the Spirit within them. In this lesson Saint Peter links the two phases of salvation history; the sufferings and the glory which is to follow. It is through Christ that all the sufferings of the prophets comes to glory.

¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you with regard to the things that have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you (through) the holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels longed to look.

The relevance of the former prophesies is now made clear to those who believe in Jesus as the Christ (Messiah). So great is God's salvation that the prophets of old and even the angels long to know of it.

Gospel - Luke 1:5-17

Our Gospel reading for this vigil Mass is from the annunciation of John the Baptist.

⁵ In the days of Herod, King of Judea,

This would be Herod the Great, son of Antipater II, an Idumean (Edomite). Idumaea was conquered by the Hasmonean ruler John Hyrcanus (135-105 B.C.), who forced the Idumeans to accept Judaism. Idumea was treated as a unit with Judea by the Hasmonaeans, Herod, and the Romans. Herod ruled as king from 37 to 4 B.C.

there was a priest named Zechariah of the priestly division of Abijah;

The name Zechariah means "Yahweh has remembered." He belonged to the eighth division of priests, those descended from Abijah, one of the twenty-four grandsons of the first high priest, Aaron.

his wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

The name Elizabeth means "God is fullness." The name was also borne by the wife of Aaron, mother of Aboihu, Nadab, Eleazar, and Ithamar (Exodus 6:23).

⁶ Both were righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly.

Unlike the Pharisees, Zechariah and Elizabeth looked to God for the fulfillment of the promises and were always willing to be guided by His will. The phraseology "commandments and ordinances" echoes Deuteronomy 6:1, 17, 25; 7:11; 10:13.

⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. ⁸ Once when he was serving as priest in his division's turn before God, ⁹ according to the practice of the priestly service, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to burn incense.

It was decided by lot which of the 800 priests of the division of Abijah would have the privilege each day of offering incense in the Holy Place, the first of the two rooms which constituted the Tabernacle (Exodus 30:1-9). This moment would have been the culmination of Zechariah's priestly life.

¹⁰ Then, when the whole assembly of the people was praying outside at the hour of the incense offering,

The fact that there appears to be a large grouping of people in attendance suggests that this is the evening, vice morning, incense offering.

¹¹ the angel of the Lord appeared to him,

This angel is identified in verse 19 as Gabriel, the angel who announced the 70 weeks of years, the final eschatological struggles, and the messianic consecration of the Holy of Holies (Daniel 9).

standing at the right of the altar of incense. ¹² Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard.

Daniel was also frightened by Gabriel's appearance and told not to fear (Daniel 10:7, 12). The words "do not be afraid" repeat a birth formula very common in the Bible (Genesis 16:11; Judges 13:3; Josiah 1:9; Isaiah 7:14). Like Zechariah, Daniel was also struck dumb, but his speech was restored (Daniel 10:15).

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John.

The name John means "Yahweh has shown favor," a name which symbolizes the role of Saint John in the redemptive plans of God.

¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of (the) Lord. He will drink neither wine nor strong drink.

The boy will be dedicated as a Nazarite before birth (Numbers 6:1-21).

He will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother's womb, ¹⁶ and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ 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."

Jewish tradition expected the return of Elijah before the "Day of the Lord" [see Malachi 4:5 (3:23 in the New American Bible)].