

Nativity of St John the Baptist  
Sunday, 24 June 2018

*“Thou, child, shalt be called the Prophet of the Most High; for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways.” Lk. 1:76*

Today, we celebrate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist instead of the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost. It is only one of the three birthdays in the Church calendar; the other two are Nativity of Jesus on Christmas Day, and the Nativity of Mary on 8<sup>th</sup> of September. As our *Communion Antiphon* mentions, St. John was the precursor, the prophet, who would go before the Messiah to prepare the way for Him by preaching a doctrine of repentance: *“Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.”* Mt. 3:2 St. John is also the link between the Old and New Testament; he is the greatest of the Old Testament prophets and, as St. Augustine says, *“He is the passive voice and Christ is the eternal Word.”* Jesus spoke of St. John the Baptist in glowing terms: *“But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall make ready the way before thee.’ Amen I say to you among those born of woman there has risen a greater than the Baptist.* (Mt. 11:7-11; Mal. 3:1) Not only was St. J the greatest of prophets, but his birth and life show forth the wondrous works of God because St. John the Baptist was the Precursor who was to prepare the way for the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel.

**The Greatest of the Prophets**

Dom Prosper Gueranger in his book, *The Liturgical Year, Vol. 12*, comments on the importance of today’s Epistle from the Prophet Isaiah (49:1-3, 5-7) as the Precursor to the Messiah: In these few lines, **“Isaias implicitly refers to the announcement of the Christ’s coming; the application here made by the Church to St. John the Baptist once more show us how closely the Messiah is united with his Precursor in the work of the redemption. Rome, once capital of the Gentile world, now mother of Christendom, delights in proclaiming, on this day, to the sons whom the Spouse has given, the consoling prophecy which was addressed to them before she herself was found upon the seven hills. Eight hundred years before the birth of John and of the Messiah, a voice had been heard on Sion, and, reaching beyond the frontiers of Jacob, had**

re-echoed along those distant coasts where sin’s darkness held mankind in the thralldom of hell: *‘Give ear, ye islands; and hearken, ye people from afar!’* It was the voice of him who was to come, and of the angel deputed to walk before him the voice of John and of the Messiah, proclaiming the one predestination common to them both, which, as servant and Master, made them to be objects of the same eternal decree. And this voice, after having hailed the privilege which would designate them, though diversely, from the maternal womb, as object of complacency to the Almighty, went on to utter the divine oracle which was to be promulgated, in other terms, over their cradles by the ministry of Zachary and of the angels. *‘And he said to me: Thou are my servant Israel, for in thee will I glory,’ in thee who are indeed Israel to me. ‘And he said: It is a small thing that thou shouldst be my servant raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to convert the dregs of Israel,’* (Is. 49:3, 6) who will not hearken to thee, and of whom thou shalt bring back but a small remnant. *‘Behold I have given thee to be the light of the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation even to the farthest part of the earth’;* to make up for the scant welcome my people my people shall have given thee, *‘kings shall see, and princes shall rise up’* at thy word, *‘and adore for the Lord’s sake, because he is faithful, and for the Holy One of Israel, who hath chosen thee’* (Is. 49:6,7) as the negotiator of his alliance.” Gueranger, p. 252-3 From these prophetic words of Isaiah, we can see the important mission of St. John the Baptist in getting all peoples, Gentiles and Jews, Kings and common-folk prepared for the coming of the Messiah, *“the Holy One of Israel.”*

*“Brood of vipers! Who has shown you how to flee from the wrath to come. Bring forth therefore fruit befitting repentance.”* Mt. 3:7-8

Dom Gueranger comments on how St. John prepared the people for Jesus Christ by preaching a doctrine of repentance for sins: **“Children of the Bridegroom let us enter into this thought; let us understand what ought to be the gratitude of us Gentiles to him to whom all flesh is indebted for its knowledge of the Redeemer (cf. Is. 49:5). From the wilderness, where his voice stung the pride of the descendants of the patriarchs, he beheld us succeeding to the haughty Synagogue; without minimizing the divine exactions, his stern language, when addressed to the Bridegroom’s chosen ones, assumed a tone of consideration which it never had for the Jews,**

**‘Ye offspring of vipers,’ said he to these latter, ‘who hath shown you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore, fruits worthy of penance, and do not begin to say: We have Abraham for our father. For I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham. For in your case already is the axe laid to the root of the tree. Every tree, therefore, that bringeth not forth good fruit shall be cut down and cast unto the fire.’ Lk. 3:7-9 But to the despised publican, to the hated soldier, to the all those parched hearts of the Gentile world, hard and arid as the desert rock, John the Baptist, announced a flow of grace that would refresh their dried up souls making them fruitful in justice: ‘Ye publicans, do nothing more than what is appointed you, by the exigencies of the tax laws; ye soldiers be content with your pay’(cf. Lk. 3:29). The law was given by Moses; but better is grace; grace and truth come by Jesus Christ whom I declare unto you (cf. Lk. 3:12-14); he it is who taketh away the sins of the world (cf. Lk. 3:16), and of his fullness we have all received (cf. Jn. 1:15-17).’” Gueranger, p. 253-4 No wonder Jesus spoke so highly of St. John the Baptist: “...among those born of woman there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist.” Mt. 11:11**

### **The Rejection of St. John the Baptist and Jesus**

Dom Gueranger shows how both St. John the Baptist and Jesus will be rejected by the Jews who opposed the promised of the Messianic Kingdom for the Gentiles: **“What a new horizon was here opened out before these objects of reproach (Publicans, Soldiers and Gentiles), held aloof so long by Israel’s scorn! But in the eyes of the Synagogue, such a blow aimed at Juda’s pretended privilege was a crime. She had borne the biting invectives of this son of Zachary; she had even, at one moment, shown herself ready to hail him (St. John) as the Christ (cf. Jn. 1:19); but she who vaunted herself as pure, to be invited to go hand in hand with the unclean Gentile—she could never submit to that; from that moment John was judged by her as his Master would be afterwards. Later on, Jesus will insist upon the difference of welcome given to the Precursor by those who listened to him. He will even make it the basis of his sentence of reprobation pronounced against the Jews: ‘Amen I say to you that the publicans and harlots shall go into the kingdom of God before you; for John came in the way of justice, and you did not**

**believe him. But the publicans and harlots believed him; but you seeing it, did not even afterwards repent, that you might believe him.’”** Mt. 21:31-2

### **Jeremiah, a figure of John and Christ**

As both St. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were rejected by the Jews, Dom Gueranger relates how the Prophet Jeremiah is a figure of both: **“Following the train of Isaiah, who has been prophesying the coming of John and of Christ, Jeremias, the figure of both, stands before us in the Gradual; he too was sanctified in his mother’s womb, and there prepared for the ministry which he was to exercise: “Behold I formed thee in the bowels of thy mother, I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb, I sanctified thee.”** Jer. 1:5 This theme is repeated in Alleluia and Communion antiphons: **“Thou, child, shalt be called the Prophet of the Highest ; thou shalt go before the Lord to prepare his ways.”** Lk. 1:76 These are the prophetic words of St. John the Baptist’s father at the time of his Circumcision when he wrote that his name will be **“John”** and prophesied in the *Benedictus*, the Gospel Antiphon for Lauds, the morning prayer of the Divine Office of the Church.

### **“John is His Name.”** Lk. 1: 63

As God does all things with wisdom and power, the events leading up to the Birth of St. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ are filled with miraculous and extraordinary occurrences. First, both saintly mothers of royal lineage, Elizabeth and Mary, experienced miraculous births by the power of the Holy Spirit; Elizabeth conceived in her old age and Mary was **“overshadowed”** by the Holy Spirit in her virginal birth. Second, while Mary had faith in the Angel Gabriel and believed that she would be the Mother of God, Zachary doubted that he and Elizabeth could conceive in their advanced age; for this lack of faith Zachary was struck dumb. Third, St. John the Baptist was sanctified in womb of Elizabeth when the Blessed Virgin Mary, **“went with haste”** (Lk. 1:39), with Jesus (who is the Lord) in her womb, to Elizabeth: **“And it came to pass, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe in her womb leapt and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb! And how have I deserved that the mother of my Lord should come to me...’** Lk. 1:41-45 Fourth, these wondrous events precede the dramatic event, where

both Elizabeth and Zachary say that the child will be called **“John”**; Zachary’s pronouncement is especially significant because he had to first write it as he was hitherto struck dumb for his disbelief: *“And asking for a writing tablet he wrote the words, ‘John is his name.’ And they all marvelled. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed and he began to speak, blessing God.”* Lk. 1:63-4 It is here that Zachary, his father, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied, *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel he has visited and wrought redemption for his people and has raised up a horn of salvation... And thou child, shalt be called the prophet of the Most High, for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways to give to his people knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of sins...Lk. 1:67-9, 76-7.* No wonder all witnessed these events wondered, *“What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.”* Lk. 1:67

### **Imitate St. John the Baptist**

In today’s secular world, we need to imitate the virtues of St. John the Baptist who served Jesus Christ as his humble messenger: *“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is He of whom I said, after me comes one who has been set above me, because he was before me.”* Jn. 1:29-30. St. John the Baptist also knew that he had to point out to both powerful and the simple the evil of sin. This eventually caused him to be a martyr for Christ when he condemned Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee: *“It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”* Mk. 6:8. Let us pray that God will raise up holy men and women as modern prophets today, like St. John the Baptist, who will prepare the way for the Second Coming of Christ when He comes, with power and justice, to judge the world.

### **Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul:**

**Thursday the 29<sup>th</sup> June 2012, is the Solemnity of Ss Peter and Paul. It is a Holyday of Obligation in England.**