

John the Baptist, June 24, 2007

1. It is interesting that the church is willing to interrupt its ordinary liturgical year in order to celebrate the Nativity of John the Baptist on Sunday. Today should be the 12th Sunday in ordinary time, and I should be wearing green, the liturgical color for ordinary liturgical time. No, you remnants of Irish in this parish, the color green for the ordinary Sundays of the year has nothing to do with being Irish. But, on the other hand, I really don't know why it is such. Is it because the color green symbolizes hope, and every Sunday is a celebration of our belief in the Resurrection of the Lord, which of course is our ultimate hope. In any case, we are celebrating the birth of St. John the Baptist.

2. You know, in the third or fourth century, that is two or three hundred years after the lifetime of our Lord, the church fixed the celebration of his birthday on December 25th, that is, the winter solstice when the sun begins to gain strength, The pagan world of that day celebrated the winter solstice. Now the church gave it a new meaning. It was the birthday of the Lord because Jesus is the increasing sun, indeed the sun that never sets. Following this line of thought, the church noticed that the scriptures presented John as saying that he must decrease while Jesus must increase. Therefore

it seemed fitting to celebrate his birthday at the time of the summer solstice when the sun begins to wane and daylight decreases.

Hence the celebration of his birthday on June 25. John is the decreasing sun (the summer solstice), while Jesus is the increasing one (the winter solstice).

3. Despite the fact that John is presented to us as the one who must decrease, the fact that the church celebrates him on a Sunday shows how important he is in the Christian scheme of things.

Indeed, in the Scriptures Jesus himself says that there is no one greater than he, although he adds the phrase: “Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” And the Lord goes on to say that John is Elijah, the one who is to come. There was a tradition in Jewish faith that the prophet Elijah would return to earth in order to introduce the time of the Messiah. Thus, in identifying John as Elijah, Jesus is claiming that he is the Messiah. And in John’s Gospel (3:22-30) that is how John presents himself. He is not the messiah, he tells his disciples. He is like the best man at a wedding, but Jesus is the groom. As such he must increase; I must decrease.

4. But in Matthew’s Gospel (11:11-16) John is presented to us as having some questions about Jesus. He is in prison, but he sends

his disciples to Jesus with the question: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” Perhaps John was disappointed in Jesus? At least this much is clear: that he had to ask if Jesus really was the awaited one. Perhaps John found it too hard to identify Jesus and what he was doing with his own understanding of what the messiah of Israel would be like. And I don’t know if Jesus’ answer would have helped him much because Jesus says: “Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.” In our mind that is an impressive list, but if John was typical of his contemporaries, it may not have been very impressive. Jesus was not a military hero. Jesus was not overthrowing the Roman occupiers, and that is what many people thought a messiah would do.

5. We know better. Or, perhaps better said, we have never had to change our idea of what a messiah is. We interpret the concept to fit Jesus, and not the other way around. We don’t interpret Jesus to fit a previous concept of messiah. But in the end, and that means John’s Gospel rather than Matthew’s because it was written twenty or thirty years after Matthew’s, John recognizes Jesus as the messiah, as the groom and himself as the best man, and therefore

as the one who must step aside, must decrease while the groom increases.

6. What could we draw from all this for ourselves? Let me mention two points. First, all of us have to learn to adopt the role of John Baptist in our lives. We have to decrease in order that Jesus may increase in our lives. And that process can be a natural part of life, because life is always calling us to put others before ourselves. As children we have to put the wishes of our parents before our own. As parents we have to put the development of our children before our own needs and desires. And as we get older we have to accept supporting roles to grown-up children and grandchildren. And then there are all the individual experiences of life, both in our personal relationships and at work, which ask us to be humble, to decrease and let the other person increase.

Second, we have to maintain our belief that we are important to God even though we may seem so small to others and ourselves. And here John Baptist is such an example. Look at the way he died. A little girl dances for King Herod and he foolishly promises her whatever she would like, even half his kingdom. At her mother's bidding she asks for John's head and it is delivered to her on a platter. What death could seem more trivial than this, and yet this is the death of God's prophet? When we are feeling small and

unimportant, it might help to think of John's death. If God's prophet could suffer such a death and still be so special to God, then we can believe that even our lives and our deaths are important to God, no matter how small and trivial they sometimes appear to us to be.