

TWELFTH SUNDAY – B – OT – OLPH gap020445rb n2012

BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

(ISAIAH 49:1-6; ACTS 13:22-26; LUKE 1:57-66, 80)

When we celebrate the memory, the deeds and words, of the saints in the Liturgy, we do not celebrate their earthly **day of birth** but usually the **day of their death**. There are only two exceptions: Mary, the mother of Jesus, and John the Baptist. They both get preferential treatment in the Liturgy each year and are honoured on a secular birthday and on a day of birth into eternal life.

I want to say a few words about the Book of the **Prophet Malachi**. Malachi is the last on the list of **minor prophets**, minor not in stature but in length. Using the medieval division of the books into chapter and verse, the major prophetic books, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are 66, 52, and 48 chapters respectively. The longest of the twelve books of the minor prophets are Hosea and Zacharia, 14 chapters each. The other ten are 3 to 5 chapters. Malachi ends in a dramatic way: “Behold I send my messenger to prepare the way before me.” and “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.”

Elijah was the greatest, most powerful of the ancient prophets. The one, who would come to prepare the way of the Messiah, would come in the power of Elijah. This one is John the Baptist, a central figure in the introduction of Jesus to the world. John’s preaching and pointing to the Lord introduce his earthly ministry in all four Gospels. In the Gospel of Luke, John’s birth is recorded in the style of the births of Sampson and Samuel. It is a foreshadowing of the birth of Jesus.

Something momentous was taking place. The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity **was becoming human**. This was the central event of humankind’s history. The one who would announce the Lord, whose life was foretold in the Book of Malachi,

John the Baptist, would be the greatest of the prophets in the Old Testament tradition and the first of the prophets in the New Testament.

The humility of John the Baptist has deeply impressed Christians through the ages. Before anyone had heard of Jesus of Nazareth, people were coming long distances to see and hear John the Baptist. Yet he always pointed to Jesus and away from himself. “He must increase, I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). According to John’s gospel, John the Baptist actually encouraged his disciples to leave him and follow Jesus, the Lamb of God.

He seems a **grim figure**; his dress, his food even, and his way of speaking were rough. Yet the gospels associate him with *joy*. At the presence of Jesus in the womb of Mary, he leapt for joy in his mother’s womb (Lk 1:44); and referring to him, Jesus said, “The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice” (Jn 3:29). The source of his joy must have sprung from the humility that so characterised him. With power and success there comes a certain greedy satisfaction, but humility is spacious enough to contain joy. “My spirit *rejoices* in God my saviour,” cried Mary, “He looks on his servant in her *lowliness*” (Lk 1:46-47).

Friends, we who believe, hope and love, should joyfully savour the gift of our salvation as recorded in the Gospels. Today we look to John the Baptist, as an ***enduring model of fidelity to God and his Law***. John prepared the way for the Christ by the testimony of his word and his life. We ought to imitate him with joyful and trusting generosity.

Saint John the Baptist is above all ***a model of faith***. Following the example of the great Prophet Elijah, in order to listen more attentively to the word of the one Lord of his life, he leaves everything and withdraws to the desert, from which he issues the resounding call for repentance to prepare the way of the Lord (cf. *Mt* 3:3).

He is *a model of humility*, because to those who saw in him not only a Prophet, but the Messiah himself, he replied in simplicity: "Who do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie" (*Acts 13:25*).

He is *a model of uprightness and courage* in defending the truth, for which he was prepared to sacrifice, even to the point of imprisonment and death. We receive the salvation Christ won for us but we are also, like John, its heralds. We, too, ought to proclaim a Baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. We, too, ought to reject sin and proclaim our belief in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.