

The Birth of John the Baptist

Luke 1:57-66,80

57 The time came for Elizabeth to have her child, and she gave birth to a son; 58 and when her neighbours and relations heard that the Lord had shown her so great a kindness, they shared her joy.

59 Now on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, 60 but his mother spoke up. 'No,' she said, 'he is to be called John.' 61 They said to her, 'But no one in your family has that name,' 62 and made signs to his father to find out what he wanted him called. 63 The father asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And they were all astonished. 64 At that instant his power of speech returned and he spoke and praised God. 65 All their neighbours were filled with awe and the whole affair was talked about throughout the hill country of Judaea. 66 All those who heard of it treasured it in their hearts. 'What will this child turn out to be?' they wondered. And indeed the hand of the Lord was with him. 80 The child grew up and his spirit matured. And he lived out in the wilderness until the day he appeared openly to Israel.

Other readings: Isaiah 49:1-6 Psalm 138 (139) Acts 13:22-26

The Solemnity of the Birth of John the Baptist takes precedence over the twelfth ordinary Sunday which we would otherwise be celebrating. The birth of the one who prepares the way for Christ is a most significant landmark in the history of salvation.

In the first two chapters of Luke's gospel the births of John the Baptist and of Jesus are recounted. The birth of John, from elderly parents, is an extraordinary gift of God, but will be overshadowed by the birth of Jesus, conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Luke stresses the joy which accompanies these births.

On the day of circumcision and naming extraordinary events occur. Both his mother and his father know that he is to be called 'John', which means 'God is compassionate.' John's father, Zechariah, loses his temporary blindness once he has confirmed Elizabeth's insight that this child will be the herald of God's loving mercy.

The people sense something extraordinary is happening. 'What will this child turn out to be?' As the gospel story unfolds, John the Baptist is shown to be the herald and baptiser of the Messiah and a great preacher of the truth. The Preface from today's feast celebrates him as 'chosen from all the prophets to show the world its redeemer' and as 'found worthy of a martyr's death, his last and greatest act of witness'.

How does John's name encapsulate his mission?

Recall the different features of John's unique role in the history of salvation.

Pray for a deeper acceptance of the gift of salvation heralded by John the Baptist.

Pray for the strength to imitate John's fidelity to the truth.