

Birth of John the Baptist

There are only three people in the New Testament whose birth is elevated by the Church to that of a feast day, Jesus on 25th December, Mary on 8th September and John the Baptist today. Jesus said of John that he was the greatest. Great in the Lord's sight doesn't mean great in the eyes of the world. John was the humblest of men, devoid of all worldly trappings.

Even in his mother's womb he made his presence felt, as it were. When Elizabeth, John's mother heard the greeting of Mary, the child in her womb leapt for joy, so near was man's salvation. So we see from this that in God's eyes, even before we are born, God has a plan for us. Luke's gospel tells us that, even from his mother's womb, John was filled with the Holy Spirit. That's why life in the womb must be protected at all costs. A cluster of cells doesn't jump for joy,

The people in today's gospel were wondering what kind of person John would turn out to be, what plan God had in store for him. I'm sure a lot of parents ponder on these questions as well regarding their own children. I remember when I was five I had a dream where I saw myself as an adult priest wearing a cassock. From that moment I wanted to be a priest. I'm fairly sure that even before we are conceived God has a design for our lives. Scripture says: 'before I formed you in the womb, I knew you'.

John Newman, whom the Pope beatified last, year wrote: "God has created me to do some definite service which he has not committed to another". Isaiah says: "the Lord called me before I was born." The same was true of John the Baptist.

That's in stark contrast to the existentialist French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre who said that man is born without a purpose and must work out for himself the meaning of his life. But then again he was an atheist.

Perhaps the job of every parent is to help their children discover what purpose God might have in store for them. We can foil the plan of God by seeing your child's success in life from a purely materialistic point of view.

Zachariah had to learn this lesson the hard way when on first hearing the news from the Angel that his elderly wife was pregnant, he doubted God's plan and was struck dumb as a consequence. The neighbours and relations in today's story also had to be taught a lesson about God's ways not being our ways when Elizabeth and Zachariah declared quite firmly that the baby's name was John despite their objections which were based on purely on human traditions.

John the Baptist didn't turn out to be everyone's 'cup of tea' but he fulfilled his vocation to the full by preparing the people for Jesus. Being a man of humility and not deeming himself fit even to undo the Lord's sandal strap, his call to repentance among the ordinary folk didn't fall on deaf ears. Towards the unrepentant, however, he was fearsome. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees 'a brood of vipers' because their religion was just for show without a change of heart.

John was a man with a definite message who didn't flinch from proclaiming it with vigour. For this he would earn the martyr's crown. St John the Baptist; pray for us.