

## **THE BIRTH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST**

John the Baptist - a voice that cries in the wilderness- "Make a straight way for the Lord."

The prophet from the desert: The 'wilderness' or desert-country around Jericho and south of Jerusalem is rough and uninviting. Scarcely anything grows: it is empty of human habitation, occupied only by wild animals. No doubt the very loneliness of the place, and the freedom from distraction, made it the ideal training-ground for John the Baptist. St. Paul, too, was prepared for his mission during a time in the desert. There seems to be something in the stark simplicity of desert life which puts people - some people at least - in close touch with God. In the harsh sunlight there is only black or white, no shades of grey. It afforded John no other luxuries - only the simplest of food and rough clothing. His camel-hair tunic and leather belt may have been worn in conscious imitation of the great prophet Elijah. He was certainly recognized instantly as a prophet. He not only looked the part, he possessed the prophet's cast-iron assurance that he had a God-given message to proclaim. The people flocked from far and wide to hear him, probably gathering beside the Jordan near Jericho, close to the place where Joshua had crossed into the promised land so many centuries before.

The prophet John, was sent by God to prepare people for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. In their old age John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were told by an angel that they would have this special son. John was related to Jesus, and just a few months older (his mother Elizabeth was Mary's cousin). He lived in the desert of Judea until God called him to be a prophet. Crowds of people came to hear his fiery preaching. 'Turn away from your sins and be baptized,' he said, 'and God will forgive you.' Although

we believe that Jesus had not sinned, he asked John to baptize him too, in the River Jordan, to show his obedience to God.

Later John was put in prison by King Herod for his outspoken criticism of his private life. According to St. Matthew, the dancing of the young Salome at Herod's birthday party, so delighted Herod that he promised on oath to give her anything she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me John the Baptist's head on a plate". That was the end of John.

I was once told a story about a Confirmation Service where a young girl danced! (If she wants a head on a plate after this, it will be yours!)

According to the Gospel of St. Matthew Jesus described John the Baptist as a prophet, and far more than a prophet. "He is the man of whom scripture says, 'Here is my herald, whom I send on ahead of you, and he will prepare your way before you'.

Clearly then, John was a great prophet and a preacher of repentance. Jesus took much from the teaching of John - they both proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus revealed that Kingdom of God in his own person. The evidence of the presence of the Kingdom was seen to be in the recovery of sight to the blind, the lame are made to walk, the lepers are cleansed and the Gospel is preached to the poor.

What is the ministry of the prophet in our own time? What voices are there who prepare the way of the Lord? How do we discern between true and false prophets?

There are many who claim to preach the word of God. We have more access to preachers and teachers than any other generation of human beings. Through Sky Television and the

Internet we will be able to listen to many voices who would claim to be prophets and who will try to win our allegiance. It is more vital than ever that we open our ears to the prophets who cry in the wilderness of our materialistic power seeking society, calling us back to the way of Christ. It is also vital that we be on our guard against false prophets. This is only possible with prayer and a mind which is alert and critical. St. Peter advised the followers of Christ "be always ready to give an answer to every man that asks you for a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear". This is not to say that we should be able to quote chapter and verse at people in order to intimidate them, but rather that we should be as well informed about our faith as we can be, and to be reasonable enough to make sense to people when they ask us what it is that we really believe.

There is a sense in which we are all called to be prophets of Jesus – to prepare people for an encounter with the living Christ..

**AMEN**