

The Nativity of John the Baptist

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 49:1-6
<i>Response</i>	I praise you, for I am wonderfully made.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 139
<i>Second Reading</i>	Acts 13:22-26
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	You, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 1:57-66, 80

The second reading for the Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, which we celebrate on June 24th, comes to us from the book of Acts 13. And this is an account of one of St. Paul's famous speeches, his speech to the people of Antioch and Pisidia. As you may recall from the Book of Acts, Paul goes around to various cities preaching the Gospel, preaching the good news of salvation. And one of the things that's interesting about these speeches and this one in particular, is that when he's telling the good news of salvation, the story of John the Baptist plays a key role in that message, right? That the good news, the Gospel, isn't just about the coming of Christ, it's also about the words and actions of John the Baptist, his forerunner, the man who preceded Christ. So let's hear what Paul says in this famous speech in Acts 13. It starts in the middle of verse 22 with these words:

[God] up David to be their king; of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. Before his coming John had preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What 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.' "Brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you that fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Well, obviously the Church has chosen this as a second reading from the Book of Acts because of what Paul says about St. John the Baptist in this particular passage. As you'll notice, part of this is just the standard summary of the fact that John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to the people of Israel. But for our purposes, what's unique about it is Paul's description of John as having both finished his course, and also as denying that he is the one who is to come. So a lot of people are thinking, Hey, maybe John is the one. Maybe John is the Messiah. Maybe John is the one we've been waiting for. And as Paul tells the people of Antioch and Pisidia, John said to them, "What do you suppose that I am? I am not he." Instead, John famously says, "after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie."

Why is this important? I think it's important because Paul bears witness to the fact in this speech, that John was so famous and John was so renowned, that a lot of people assumed that he was the Messiah, that he was the one who was to come. And so one of the things John has to do in the face of his fame and in the face of his popularity, and in the face of certain rumors that he might be the one, is actually humble himself and make clear, not only that he is not the Messiah, but that he's not even worthy to carry the sandals of the one who is to come after him. In other words, John himself clarifies that his role in the Gospel, his role in the message of salvation, is going to be that of the forerunner to the one who is to come, of the forerunner to the Messiah, rather than the Messiah himself.

So, in the readings for today, as we're celebrating the Feast of St. John the Baptist, on the one hand we recognize that John's coming, John's advent, John's birth, is such a momentous event that we have a whole feast day to celebrate it and that we recall his coming into the world as the first very clear and visible sign of the fact that the Messiah was also coming. At the same time, the reading in a sense puts John in his place, and makes clear that John is not the hope of the people of Israel. He's not the one who is to come. He's not even worthy to carry the sandals, or to untie the sandals of Christ as the Messiah. So it manifests the humility of John. He is rather the precursor to the Messiah.

And so in order to just demonstrate this and illustrate it, I thought this might be a good opportunity to share with you a little evidence from Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, as to just how famous John was. I think, for many readers of the Gospel, if you've grown up Christian, if you've grown up Catholic, and you're

familiar with the Gospels, you of course know John's the forerunner, Jesus is the Messiah. I mean, that's a given. We don't have the same kind of confusion or curiosity about who John may or may not have been as his first audience did. But what's interesting is if you turn to the writings of Josephus, a first century Jewish historian who I've cited frequently in these videos, Josephus intriguingly has in his account of the history of the Jews, he does have sections that deal with both Jesus of Nazareth and with John the Baptist, both figures that are very important in the Christian tradition. In fact, sometimes people will question whether Jesus ever existed or not, some atheists and skeptics. And one of the key arguments in favor of his existence is that apart from the fact that he has four biographies written in the lifetime of his disciples, but that's a different issue, is the fact that there are external witnesses as well, like Josephus, who isn't himself a Christian, but he's a historian who testifies in the first century AD to Jesus's, not just his existence, but his influence and the existence of his followers.

But what's neat about Josephus' testimony, is that he actually devotes more time to John the Baptist than he does to Jesus, which gives us an interesting window into just how famous John the Baptist really was. So as we are celebrating St. John the Baptist on the feast of his nativity, listen to these words of Josephus about the fame of John the Baptist, and why it would be that John would need to say, I'm not the Messiah, because he was so popular among the Jewish people. These are the words of Josephus about John the Baptist:

Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away of some sins, but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now, when others came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and

was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army [meaning Herod's army] was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure against his.²

Okay, so notice a few things that Josephus tells us about John the Baptist. Number one, John the Baptist was so popular that when he was slain, when he was executed by Herod, the people took a later defeat of Herod's army as a divine punishment against Herod for executing someone who had been, in fact, a righteous man, a man who was a prophet. So you see there, number one, John had the popular opinion on his side. That's the first point. Number two, notice Josephus here describes John very positively as having engaged in this baptism of repentance and calling people to two kinds of virtue. He mentions righteousness toward one another and piety toward God.

Now those two terms that Josephus uses, actually apply to the two tablets of the Decalogue and the Ten Commandments, *eusebeia*, from which we get the name Eusebius, is piety. That has to do with the first tablet of Ten Commandments, like keeping the Sabbath, not committing idolatry, not blaspheming God. That's called piety in Judaism, it's referred to as a way of summing up the exercise of the love of God and fidelity to the first tablet of the Ten Commandments. The other one, righteousness or *dikaiosune*, same word as justification that Paul will use. That has to do with love of neighbor. So don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't covet, don't bear false witness. All the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, thou shall not murder, fidelity to those commandments was known as righteousness or justification, *dikaiosune*, it's the same word in Greek. So according to Josephus, John, this is interesting, was a man who taught people to follow The Commandments, right? He's not saying that explicitly, but that's the implicit thrust of what he's saying here in describing John. So we get a little bit of a window into the fact that John wasn't just a preacher of repentance, he also was a teacher of virtue. He was calling people to turn away from sin and to follow the Decalogue, to follow the Ten Commandments, or at least that's how Josephus understands him.

And notice here that, third, that according to Josephus, the reason Herod executes John, or the reason that Josephus gives, is not focused on the controversy over his incestuous marriage with his brother's wife, Herodius, which is what the Gospels focus on. Josephus sees Herod's motive for executing John flowing from John's

² Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116-119; trans. W. Whiston.

popularity, that he had such a heavy influence of the people that they might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion against Herod. Now, this can easily be harmonized with the Gospel accounts of John's focus on Herod's illicit marriage to Herodius because you can imagine if John was preaching against Herod's illicit marriage to Herodius, he might be concerned that the people would rise up against him as a lawbreaker and try to rebel against him or depose him in some sense. So it's two different angles on the criticism of Herod, but they go together, they're harmonizable, so to speak. And what's interesting about it though, is that Josephus reveals how popular John was. John was famous, everybody appreciated him, revered him, and favored him over Herod, and saw Herod's eventual execution of him as something that was really a sin against God, that merited divine punishment eventually, as an injustice that actually merited punishment from God of Herod's army. So I just bring that passage to your attention, Josephus' testimony to John the Baptist, to at least give you a little bit of an example of why Paul, if we go back to the reading for today, is preaching in Antioch and Pisidia.

Why would Paul need to make clear that John was not the Messiah and that Jesus was? Well, remember, John had heavy influence. He had a very popular following among the Jewish people, and so one of the things that's going to be part of the early proclamation of the Gospel in cities like Antioch, where there was a large Jewish population, was to clarify that John the Baptist was merely the precursor to Jesus. That John the Baptist is merely the forerunner to the Messiah. And no matter how great he was, he was not He who is to come.

So in closing, I'd just like to take something, usually I'll quote one of the church fathers in terms of the living tradition of the Church, but here I would just actually like to quote the Collect, the prayer for Mass at the beginning of the day, that with which the priest opens the Mass, the Solemnity of the Nativity of John the Baptist. And here the priests will begin with these words:

O God, who raised up Saint John the Baptist to make ready a nation fit for Christ the Lord, give your people, we pray, the grace of spiritual joys and direct the hearts of all the faithful into the way of salvation and peace.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

So you see there, even in the Collect today, notice what it says, God raised up John the Baptist to prepare, to make ready the nation fit for Christ the Lord. So that's

why we're celebrating him, because he was, of all the prophets, the principle precursor to the coming of Christ, the Messiah, the Lord.