

Vigil Mass of the Nativity of St John the Baptist B/2012

The readings of this eve of the nativity of St John focus on the vocation of the prophet and the sense of the mission he has received from God. They also shed light on our vocation by reminding us that we have all been called to serve the Lord and to be his servants from our birth.

In the first reading, the prophet Jeremiah talks about his vocation. He describes how God chose him in a very mysterious way, since he was formed in the womb of his mother in order to be a prophet to the nations.

While he was afraid he was not up to his responsibilities because of his age, God reassured him by his presence. That is why his young age was not a big problem; he had to go wherever God sent him and spoke whatever he commanded him. Moreover, God strengthened his speech by touching his lips and gave him a clear mission to perform before the nations.

What is behind this text is the idea that the vocation of a prophet is a mystery that only God alone can explain. Whatever might be the human weakness of the prophet, if he remains faithful to his vocation, God can purify him and make him a strong instrument of his mission.

Another idea is that the mission of the prophet is risky, because he is sent not only in order to speak nice words, but also in order to tear down what is not right, to destroy what is unlawful and to build what is pleasing to God.

This text on the vocation of Jeremiah allows us to understand the mission of John the Baptist and his birth, as described in today's Gospel. First of all, the Gospel talks about Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John Baptist, who were both barren and righteous people before God.

As Zechariah was a priest, his turn came to serve in the temple sanctuary and to burn the incense. At that time, he received an apparition of an angel who talked to him about the imminent birth of a son who was to be born to him and Elizabeth. They had to call him John.

The angel described also what the life of John would be and what that event would mean to his father and to the people of Israel. While his birth will bring joy and gladness to Zechariah, his father, many will also rejoice in Israel at his birth. John himself will be great in the sight of God, as he will turn many of the children of Israel to God, preparing them to be a people fit for the Lord. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from the womb of his mother, and he will be sober in his life.

What do we learn from these texts? The first thing we learn is about the mystery of the vocation of a prophet. Sometimes people ask me, when did you really know that you will become a priest and not someone else? My answer has very often been like this: "I do not know". In fact, what I do is to explain to them my past background and the spiritual environment in which I grew up in order to let them realize that these have played a big role in my determination to become priest.

By doing so, what I do is to give a human account of my vocation. But such an account is partial because many young men of my age and who had been in the same situation

like me did not become priests any way. Such a consideration shows that behind my vocation was the invisible hand of God who guided me through those human circumstances to the priesthood. I believe that this is what the prophet Jeremiah had in mind when he states his vocation: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you".

This being said, it is clear that any vocation has two faces, namely a human face which we tell in the account of our human history, and a spiritual face that is hidden in the invisible hand of God who works through human circumstances. That is what appeared in the life of John the Baptist. God prepared him since his conception in the womb of his mother for a plan he had in his mind, namely to be a precursor to Jesus.

The second thing I want to say is about the mission of the prophet. A prophet is not out there for a game, but for an important duty on which the life of many depends. Moreover, a prophet is not out there on his own behalf, but for a mission he has received. That is why he is like an ambassador whose role is to represent the country that sent him on mission.

An ambassador might have his own opinion on problems, but he has to defend the official position of his government. That is why the task of the prophet is very risky. He cannot always play the nice guy. Sometimes he has to be harsh and at the discontentment of his listeners. I believe that is what Jeremiah states when the text says: "I set you over nations and over kingdoms, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant".

Because his mission is important, the prophet has to be prepared by a special life of prayer, deep spirituality and quality. All that is expressed in the life of John the Baptist through the particularity of his life style: not drinking wine or strong drink; being filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb, etc.

In fact John was a holy man whose life reflected the vocation he has received from God. He is a model for each one of us. He reminds us that we are all called to be the servants of the Lord, each one according to his vocation. In our vocation, too, we are not out there for our own glory, but for God's glory. That is our mission in the world and before others. Let us pray, then, that the Lord may make us aware of our vocation and give us the grace of his Holy Spirit so that we may fulfill it according to his will. May God bless you all!

Jeremiah 1: 4-10; 1 Peter 1: 8-12; Luke 1: 5-17



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