

Solemnity of the Nativity of St John the Baptist B/2012

The readings of this feast 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 own vocation by reminding us that we have all been called to serve the Lord and to be his servants since our birth.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah talks about his vocation. He describes how God chose him since he was formed in the womb of his mother, gave him a name and destined him to be a light to the nations.

The mission for which he was chosen was to bring back and to gather to God the people of Israel, to make God's glory shine at the face of the nations and his salvation reach to the ends of the earth.

In order to make his mission successful, God endowed him with gifts so that he might be like a sharp-edged sword and polished arrow. While the prophet thought that he was working in vain, God reassured him that he was with him and that the reward of his work was in him.

What is behind this text is the idea that the vocation of a prophet is part of God's plan of salvation he has prepared even before his servants were born. Because his life is part of God's plan and though he might be disappointed about the success of his preaching, the prophet knows in faith that God is always with him and he will reward him.

This text on the vocation of Isaiah allows us to understand the mission of John the Baptist and the meaning of his life as related in today's Gospel. The Gospel focuses especially on the birth of John. It describes what happened at that time when Elizabeth gave birth to John. It shows that the neighbors and relatives of Zechariah's family rejoiced greatly at the birth of John.

When Zechariah gave the name of John to his son, he and his wife Elizabeth were obeying the injunctions the angel gave them before the birth of the child. Zechariah himself was healed that day while the whole town was in motion. His son grew up under God's guidance and became strong in spirit until the day he manifested to the people of Israel.

What do we learn from this Gospel? 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 been very often 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 an invisible hand of God who guided me through those human circumstances to the priesthood. I believe that this is what the prophet Isaiah had in mind when he states his vocation: "The Lord called me from birth; from my mother's womb he gave me a name".

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 mom for a plan he had in his mind, namely to be a precursor to Jesus.

All that brings us to God's time. As the Gospel says, when the time arrived, Elizabeth gave birth to a son. This is not human time, but God's time, which is very different from the human calendar. In that sense, the birth of John happened at the time it pleased God to put end to the barrenness of Elizabeth and Zechariah. His birth, in fact, teaches us that God has his time to intervene in our life and to resolve the problem we are dealing with. Let us not be discouraged or disappointed when things do not work as we wish, because God has his time to console us.

The second thing I want to highlight is about the mystery of the future of a child. In today's Gospel I am really struck by the reaction from the people of Zechariah's village, "What, then, will this child be"? Such a reaction shows that the coming into the world of a newborn is always a mystery. There is the story of a Latin teacher who always bowed before his students before teaching them. When asked why he was doing so, he answered that it is because you never know what one of these students will be in life.

That is true for each one of us and for many great people we remember in human history. They were all small babies, but who by growing have marked human history in a special way. That is why we have to understand that each child deserves not only to be protected, but also that in each one of them there is a great potential that we as adults have to develop. Imagine if our parents did not care at all about us, how we would have been lost. How much would be lost in the world if we did not exist?

All that brings before us the question of responsibility we have for our children. In fact, to be parents is a great joy, but it creates a responsibility. Today as we celebrate the birthday of John the Baptist, we are reminded about our responsibility as parents and educators. Let us ask God to help us fulfill our duties with the grace he gives us through the sacraments of the Church. Let us ask him to help us protect human life and our children for the future of the Church and of the world. God bless you all!

Isaiah 49: 1-6; Acts 13: 22-26; Luke 1: 57-66, 80



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