

'WHAT'S IN A NAME?' THE BIRTHDAY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

In every family, the birth of a new baby is usually a source of joy and excitement. There's excitement even before it happens. This is particularly the case when a couple is expecting their first baby. In any case, the news of the arrival of a new baby is eagerly passed on from one family member to another. 'Is it a boy or a girl?' they want to know. 'Who is the baby like?' 'Has the baby got its father's red hair?' 'Are Mum and Bub both well?' 'What's the baby's name?', and even when the name is known: 'Why on earth did they call the baby that?'

That last question is the very same one that bothered the relations and friends of Elizabeth and Zechariah, when they heard that the couple's first and only child was being named 'John'. They asked: 'Why on earth didn't they respect Jewish custom and tradition and call him "Zechariah" after his father? Where did they get that "John" from? What got into them?'

What got into them? Nothing less than God's decision to be the one to give this baby his name! And why would God do that? Simply because, while every baby is special, this baby is extra-special! His destiny is to introduce to the world the person of Jesus Christ. His destiny is to go out into the desert to be a voice crying in the wilderness. His destiny is to shout the good news there that the king and saviour of the world is on his way. His destiny is to call on people to straighten out the bumps in their lives and prepare a straight and smooth highway for the coming of their king. 'Repent', he will say over and over again. 'Get ready for the coming of the Messiah. Give up your selfishness, your greed, your self-indulgence, your dishonesty, your disloyalty, your anger, your nastiness, your hostility. Clean up your act, get washed clean in the Jordan River, and make a brand-new start.' And so, even in his mother's womb, John is said to have leapt with joy at the prospect of being so closely associated with the person of Jesus.

What will also be extra special about this forerunner of the messiah to come is his humility. He's on no ego-trip. He will say in relation to Jesus: 'I am not fit to undo his sandals.' 'I must decrease; he must increase.' His intention will always be to point away from himself to the Messiah. So single-minded will he be about this, that just as soon as he can he will go out into the desert to live, and to live ever so simply by wearing animal skins for clothes and eating grasshoppers and wild honey for food.

What a man! How aptly the words of God in our First Reading today apply to him: 'I will make you the light of the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth!' Indeed, as the gospel says, 'the hand of the Lord was with him'.

'What's in a name?' asks Australian poet, C.J. Dennis, in one of his famous pieces. My given names are 'Brian Peter'. Brian means 'strong' and 'brave', after the Irish king who won the Battle of Clontarf in 1054. 'Peter' means 'rock'. What a lot I have to live up to! When Elizabeth and Zechariah were told by God to name their son 'John', it was a name that had never occurred to them. But when they understood that it means literally 'God has shown favour to us', they were more than happy to do so. So, if your name is John, or Jack, or Jock, or Sean, or Giovanni, you can be proud to carry that name.

When the relations of Elizabeth and Zechariah heard how the child came to be called 'John', they understood that he was destined for great things. They wondered: 'What will this child turn out to be? Every parent wonders about this at the birth of their child. Our parents too, yours and mine, have had great expectations of us. God too has had great expectations of us. How have we lived up to their hopes and expectations? How have we turned out so far?

To the extent that we have lived up to what they have expected of us, let us give sincere thanks to God in our prayer today and mean it! And if we have been something of a disappointment, a let-down, let us in prayer seek God's favour and support to make a fresh start, a brand-new start.

Our time on earth is running out. Perhaps in the time left to us we will after all, with the help of God, start living up to all of our parents' hopes and dreams for us.

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