

Homily for Birth of John, the Baptism 6-23-18

His name shall be JOHN, his mother declares. And John it is. Not Zachariah Jr. as Jewish families commonly named their first born son after their father. But not in this case: not Zachariah, but John.

From the very beginning there was something special about this young man, the cousin of Jesus. His young adult years found him out in the desert, preparing to be the prophet, the preacher with a tongue like a two edged sword.

As we celebrate the feast of his birth, the message of John the Baptist's preaching is that the world will receive Jesus Christ only when we turn away from our violent and oppressive ways. (comment on guns)

The world must allow the prophets "to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the rebellious to the wisdom of the just."

Even John the Baptist himself expected the Messiah to come with that kind of transforming power. John's concern was justice, repentance, asceticism. He baptized with water and he warned people of an approaching time of reckoning and expected the longed-for messiah to come precisely like a violent fire, a winnowing fan that would separate the bad from the good and burn up the bad with a righteousness that came straight from God. He encouraged a baptism

of repentance by being baptized in the Jordan River in order to escape God's wrath.

And so, when John the Baptist heard reports of Jesus gently welcoming sinners in, rather than casting them out, John was scandalized; that kind of a Messiah didn't fit his expectations or his preaching. That's why Jesus, in sending a response to him, invited John not to be scandalized in him. John didn't want a gentle, vulnerable, peace-preaching Messiah. John wanted bad people punished, not converted.

That is why when John was in prison about to be beheaded for standing up to a sinful civil leader, he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him, "Are you he who to come or should we expect someone else?" Jesus sends this response to John. "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard. The blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them, Blest is that man who finds no stumbling block in me." Lk 7 20-23

**To his credit, once John saw how Jesus' power worked,
he understood,
accepted a deeper truth,
stepped back in self-effacement,**

and pointed people in Jesus' direction with the words, "He must increase and I must decrease. I'm not even worthy to untie his scandal strap."

Pausa

I believe many of us gathered here today follow the same path as John, the Baptist.

- We may not wear clothes made of camel's hair,
- we may not go out into the desert to pray;
- we may not have a diet of honey and locusts,
- we may not do public preaching calling the world to repentance.

But like John, the Baptist,

- we work hard,
- struggle to raise our families,
- care for our neighborhoods, and share with those in need.

But, as it turns out, often we, like John, think that we have spent our strength uselessly. In short, we feel like the prophet, Jeremiah, in today's first reading who thinks that he has failed, failed, failed!

Sometimes we ask, "Is this all that comes from all our labor to pay our bills?, to build up our families in love?, to bring justice and peace to our world? At times NOTHING, seems to work! We are like John, imprisoned in our own failing efforts to bring about God's kingdom.

There is the lesson for us in our sadness,

in all our failures,

In the failures of our church,

In the failures of our government policies.

In today's first reading, after considering all his discouragement and failure, the prophet, Jeremiah concludes: my God is my strength. I will be glorious in the sight of the Lord.

Our hope is in the strength of the Lord, not in our own strength. And if we are not successful in our own eyes, we will yet be glorious in the eyes of the Lord. It is a wonderful hope, isn't it?

Back in 1971, a Synod of Bishops from throughout the world reflected on the challenges we face in our times. Their comments are still very poignant today. They shared this message:

In the face of the present-day situation of the world, marked as it is by the grave sin of injustice, we recognize both our responsibility and our inability to overcome it by our own strength. Such a situation urges us to listen with a humble and open heart to the word of God, as he shows us new paths towards action in the cause of justice in the world

Synod of Bishops, Justice in the World, 1971:29

(PAUSE)

His name was John, or Mary or Peter, yet we are all called by name as part of the family of God to proclaim in Word and deed the coming of the Lord. Be not discouraged! Bring LIFE to our troubled world.