

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jun 24th 2016

This liturgical celebration, also known as Little Christmas, begins with an Entrance Antiphon from the Prologue of John's Gospel. "There was a man sent by God who came to testify to the light, to prepare a people fit for the Lord. John makes this clear and strong statement, right at the beginning. John is not the Light, not the Christ! This might answer the question about why this birthday isn't on June twenty-fifth, exactly six months before the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus. There is to be no parallel between the two, not even in the Church's calendar of feasts.

The First Reading from the Prophet Isaiah opens with verses which seem to be words spoken by John the Baptist. Though that is how it sounds, the words and claims are spoken about the dignity of the people of Israel, the people of God. They are being prepared to make known the Person of the One God. They have been hidden, sharpened, prepared to be the birthing mother of the Longed-For. It is through the Servant Israel, that God's glory will be seen and known.

Israel's role is not a little one. Their faith in their God is to be shared, spread to all the nations. The little or insignificant will be instrumental in extending God's love through a nation-servant as well as through a person-servant, the Baptist, who longed for the Christ as did the nation Israel. The nation and the person, though small, were raised to be agents of revelation.

In the Second Reading, we listen to Paul explaining to his Jewish listeners that from their King David's descendants the Long-Awaited-For, the Savior of Israel would appear. Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, presents Paul's words about John in a similar way as did the author of the Gospel of John. The Baptist knew who he was and who he was not. Paul relates words of John's knowing his identity and his role.

In the early Christian Communities this became a large issue so that all four Gospels speak of John and his role in preparing Israel and the readers of these Gospels to accept Jesus as the Messiah and John as His graced advance-man.

In this celebration we remember his being born. For the Jews, birth into the People of God was celebrated at the circumcision which was the physical rite of being alive according to God's Law. Luke has this "Nativity-Form" which he uses in two announcements by an angel to two unsuspecting persons of great faith. Zechariah had been performing his duties in the Holy of Holies, as priest, so he was alone. An angel appeared and dropped a life-changing message on him about an up-coming pregnancy which is not physically possible for Elizabeth. As with the announcement to Mary earlier in the same chapter, the natural response is questions and fear. The angel calms him as the angel did with Mary. Predictions are made about the future of the child and the place he will have in God's ways. Things are all set and time is drawing near for time to stand still. It is interesting and helpful to read side-by-side both announcements and both births and circumcisions. Both John the Baptist and Jesus were born into law-serving faithful families and learned obedience to God by being obedient to the Law.

What we hear in today's Gospel is how John receives his name, not according to traditions of the clan, but according to God's gradual completing of the Law. Zachariah did not believe, or receive, or so believe something new and different and personal. He was not allowed to speak until the circumcision

and the name-changing experience. God spoke through Moses and speaks through the Law and the Prophets of the Law. Now God is entering, personally, physically, and interpersonally into the human family. John and Jesus will get very personal, “in your face” personal and as with Mary and Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth, life-interrupting.

The neighbors and relatives in today’s Gospel marvel and wonder as they leave the gathering. The shepherds will do the same at the birth of Jesus. Wondering, being puzzled, being perplexed, doubting, challenging are ways of healthy responses to the workings of God in and around us. We clench our fists, stamp our feet, and shake our heads, good physical responses. Doubts are a part of the “nativity-form” and a part of our being obedient to God by being obedient to the reality of our limited intellects and imaginations. Zachariah is the man. Mary is the woman. We play our parts in creating God’s rekingdoming of God’s garden. Neither of these two persons was quick on their responses. We are asked to listen to the invitations of the Gospel and our Church and our God and we pray with our excuses, doubts and fears. We then pray with speechless hearts and waiting minds to see what else will God be doing with and through us.

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