

First reading Isaiah 49:1-6

Islands, listen to me, pay attention, remotest peoples. The Lord called me before I was born, from my mother's womb he pronounced my name. He made my mouth a sharp sword, and hid me in the shadow of his hand. He made me into a sharpened arrow, and concealed me in his quiver.

He said to me, "You are my servant (Israel) in whom I shall be glorified"; while I was thinking, "I have toiled in vain, I have exhausted myself for nothing"; and all the while my cause was with the Lord, my reward with my God. I was honoured in the eyes of the Lord, my God was my strength.

And now the Lord has spoken, he who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, to gather Israel to him: "It is not enough for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel; I will make you the light of the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Second reading Acts 13:22-26

Paul said: "God made David, the king of our ancestors, of whom he approved in these words, 'I have selected David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart, who will carry out my whole purpose.' To keep his promise, God has raised up for Israel one of David's descendants, Jesus, as Saviour, whose coming was heralded by John when he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the whole people of Israel. Before John ended his career he said, 'I am not the one of you imagine me to be; that one is coming after me and I am not fit to undo his sandal.' My brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of Abraham's race, and all you who fear God, this message of salvation is meant for you."

Gospel Luke 1:57-66.80

The time came for Elizabeth to have her child, and she gave birth to a son; and when her neighbours and relations heard that the Lord had shown her so great a kindness, they shared her joy.

Now on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, but his mother spoke up. "No," she said "he is to be called John." They said to her, "But no one in your family has that name", and made signs to his father to find out what he wanted him called. The father asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they were all astonished. At that instant his power of speech returned and he spoke and praised God.

All their neighbours were filled with awe and the whole affair was talked about throughout the hill country of Judaea. All those who heard it treasured it in their hearts. "What will this child turn out to be?" they wondered. And indeed the hand of the Lord was with him. The child grew up and his spirit matured. And he lived out in the wilderness until the day he appeared openly to Israel.

Meditation

By the fourth century there was an almost universal celebration of John the Baptist in the liturgical calendars of the Churches. Many churches were dedicated to him. Among them was the baptismal chapel of the Lateran Basilica in Rome and eventually the basilica itself. The eventual fixing of this date for the celebration of his birth seems to rest upon Gabriel's announcement to Mary (the Annunciation, March 25) that Elizabeth, John's mother, was already six months with child.

Inspired by the strict parallelism which Luke establishes between Jesus and the Baptist in the infancy narrative, the liturgy delights in celebrating two births: the birth of the Messiah at the winter solstice and the birth of his precursor at the summer solstice. This in itself speaks eloquently of John's importance. His is a strange destiny. It is characterized by rigorous asceticism to which he joins an intense spiritual happiness. "He will never drink wine or strong drink" (Luke 1:15), yet twice in his life he greets the Lord with joy: in his mother's womb, and, when, as an adult, he points out the Messiah. Between these two moments, he is the voice crying in the desert.

Tradition sees the desert as the place where God speaks to the heart of his people but also as the dwelling place of evil. It is from this solitary place of spiritual combat, the desert bordering the Jordan, that John appears "with the spirit and the power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). By his word of fire and his baptism with water, he must call the children of the covenant back to the Lord their God. John is not only the fiery preacher of judgement. He appears as the friend who leads the bride to the bridegroom and then withdraws. He relentlessly directs hearts toward Jesus. Then he seeks to decrease so that the other may increase. Thus is the servant conformed to his master.