

June 24, 2018 12th Sunday in Ordinary time

Today we take a break from ordinary time to celebrate one of the oldest feast in the church. This feast goes back to the same time as Christmas being celebrated. The earliest we can find writings, Was the early 500s. This was the time that Christmas was beginning to be popularly celebrated as well, which makes sense because John the Baptist and Jesus are always intertwined. This feast was a joyful feast, people love this feast. First off, because it happened in summertime and you have to realize, in Northern Europe, in most of Europe where the church started, it's cold, it's dark. So all of a sudden you had something to celebrate in summertime, especially around the solstice when the days are the longest. But now the sunlight starts decreasing little by little, not fast enough for me, but it starts decreasing until you get to Christmas. Then you have Jesus six months later being born after John was born and all of a sudden the days start increasing until we get back to here again. So, there is a method to the church is madness in celebrating this feast when it does. But the way they celebrated it, there was three days of fasting before this feast and then on this feast day just like Christmas and Easter, at a time when a priest can really celebrate one Mass per Sunday, he was allowed to celebrate three. The first was at midnight and the other two were during the day. The night before the people would build bonfires on top of mountains, they would like them and these were St. John's fires. St. John's fires reminding us that he pointed the way to the light. The light came and drove away the darkness. They would make floral arrangements just specific for that day and if they lived by a stream or river, when the feast was over they would set them a float on the water. And there were special dances for today and there was special special food for today and there was all kinds of celebration. And the one thing I can't figure out and have not gotten an explanation from no matter how much I researched it, strawberries were eaten today. I don't know why. Maybe you can find out and let me know. That's just one of those crazy things that may have gotten lost in time.

But this feast is very popular because of who St. John was. Saint John was a very interesting person. He was born in a priestly family. His mother Elizabeth was from the priest of Aaron, the brother of Moses. His father was descendent from the priest Zadok. Zadok was a priest from the king Solomon. He was one of the first priests in the temple. In fact he was the high priest in the temple, when Solomon built it. So you have a double priestly family right here. But why didn't John become a priest? John did not become a priest because of some historical things that were going on. Harrod and his sons rebuild the temple at the time of John and Jesus. And when they rebuilt it even though they were Roman pagans they said, "We reserve the right to appoint high priests and other officials in the temple." Making it a political situation, making it full of corruption, and bad things happening to ordinary people. This actually happened in the Catholic Church many many times in our history, when we let emperors and kings appoint bishops, we have the same kind of corruption. The temple was not a good place, it was not where it was supposed to be as far as the center of the universe, the holy place, the place where I can get in touch with God. So John's parents, when he was a little boy, decided we don't want him associated with all that nonsense. And so, there was a community out in the desert in a monastery/convent situation, they were called the Essenes, and they sent John out there. The Essenes would take in young boys, just like religious communities and raise them in the monastery, raise the girls in the convents and then when they were ready they could stay there or they could go do something else. Well, we all know that John was filled with the Holy Spirit from conception, because when Mary came what happened? He leapt in Elizabeth's womb, at the sight of Jesus. Even though they couldn't see each other they could sense each other, you know, cousins' ESP or something. We see that he was filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit that means he knew how to listen. So the Holy Spirit will tell him in the desert one day hey, "it's time to move on, it's time to go back to civilization."

He was what we call a Nazarite. A Nazarite was really holy person at that time, and before. No razor ever cut their hair, never had a razor touched their beard, they drank no alcohol of any kind, and most likely they didn't take a bath. Up into the middle ages, people who didn't take baths were seen as holy. I don't know how they considered that holy, you could smell them a mile away I guess, who knows. So, they had all these kinds of characteristics. He comes from the desert and the people are looking, they're looking for a person from God. They're not finding them in the church in the temple. They're looking for a person that will lead them to a deeper relationship with God. And so John, comes out and he starts prophesying. And the people are like, "Yes, finally God, why? There hasn't been a profit from God in over 300 years, the people have not heard the will of God for over 300 years. Now John comes out and boom! There is the will of God. He is announcing the coming of the Messiah. "I am not he," he says. "But, I am the one who announces him." If you see paintings of John the Baptist in the Jordan River or wherever he's at, always there's a hand pointing to another guy in the picture, he's pointing to Jesus. That was his sore function. So he told the people, "Look, repent of your sins, get down in the Jordan and have water flow over you and wash you clean. Not baptism like we know it. The reason is, for us when we hear the river Jordan we think, baptism of Jesus. But the people in the time of Jesus, the river Jordan meant for them, a fulfillment of God's promise. That's the river that the Israelites crossed over after leaving the desert for 40 years, after leaving Egypt. That's God's promise. Here's the promised land. So to be a part of the Jordan River they were renewing them selves to the covenant of God. We recognize that God has finally fulfilled his covenant. And that's what John was talking about, that's why he was pointing to Jesus. Because this covenant, as we mentioned before in one of the masses, genesis 3:15 was the first mention of this. John is the one who points the way. John has a tremendous position, a wonderful position. They left out some of the good parts of the gospel. Last night we read the first part of chapter 1. It talks about Zachariah being in the temple and the angel coming to him saying, "Zachariah, guess what, at 80 years old you're going to become a dad and Elizabeth, who is going to be just a little bit younger, is going to have a baby." Zachariah didn't believe it. So the angel said, "Well, since you don't believe it, you're not going to be able to talk until the baby's born. So he couldn't. Can you imagine? A 75-year-old woman who is pregnant and her husband couldn't say anything. And that's why we get the story today, about him writing on the tablet, his name is John. Because that means Zachariah finally excepted the prophesy from the Angel and his mouth could be opened again. Just in time to rejoice and hopefully forgive Elizabeth for whatever happened during the pregnancy. We see that it's all special circumstances. But who else has an angel appear to them in a special person? Jesus. John and Jesus are so intimately linked in all kinds of signs and symbols, it's almost as if we have an alter ego of Jesus. But John was a political failure as social failure. John got the people to repent and come back to God, that's a spiritual success. But he failed in the secular realm. He spoke the truth, he wasn't politically correct. He spoke up about the holiness of marriage. Herrod had divorced his wife, married his sister-in-law, who also happens to be his niece. John spoke up about this, said, "This is wrong!" Well Herrod, with an executive order said, "You are under house arrest." Then he threw a big party and the stepdaughter Salome, did a hip-hop number that was just fantastic, and John lost his head. It was time for him to decrease totally so that Jesus could start his ministry, and that's what happened.

We have a tremendous person today and that's what shows in the fact that, there are only two people we celebrate birthdays into this world. Our Blessed mother and Saint John the Baptist. Everybody else, we celebrate their birthdays in to the next life. It shows how big he is in all of this history. The other thing it shows is John is the only person that exists in the old testament and the new testament to show us the way to Jesus. He unites the Old and New Testament of the Bible. Without John you don't have a hinge, you don't have anything to join them. He becomes a greater figure because of this. And even though he was a political failure, a secular failure, what did Jesus say? "No man is greater than him, born of woman." "The greatest human being that ever lived, Jesus said. That's tremendous praise from God.

The world sees that and they see that without John the Baptist, where was Jesus? We wouldn't have been ready for Jesus. John the Baptist is a representation of us. We must decrease in our life, we must decrease in our estimation, we must decrease in our pride, so that Jesus can increase in us. So that we can point the way to Jesus. We are only going to point the way to Jesus for someone else if we're not full of ourselves. If we're full of ourselves, we want their attention. So we get two messages from John. We get, "Always speak the truth," no matter the consequences always speak the truth. Not subjective truth not how I feel or how someone else feels or what the polls say or whatever, but the objective truth that is found in the Scriptures in the Catholic Church the body of Christ on earth. The second thing is, "Always point the way to Jesus," by our words by our actions, point the way to Jesus. That is what it means from our baptismal promises that's what it means from confirmation, receiving the sacraments, point the way to Jesus. Be a John the Baptist for somebody else, be the person that unites lives by showing that Jesus wants to be a part of of them. These are the two things we learn from John and there's so much more about John. Volumes and volumes have been written about John, because he's the greatest.

Here in the Southwest, we used to have a lot of celebrations, they've gone down hill now since air-conditioning, but they've gone downhill. We used to have a feast days, we used to have fiestas, we used to have all kinds of things, later in the evening. It's because St. John's nativity, in the feast today was associated with the beginning of the monsoon season. Now, the weather services decided, we are tired of checking the dew-point and all that garbage, June 15 boom, that's the monsoon season. Mother nature just goes like this at you because it still hasn't happened. Back in the day, they would say, if everything went right, the first rainfall for the year, of monsoon season would be today. It happened more often than not. We prayed, we had a big celebration because it was the beginning of the rain season. We have a lot of things with John. It is great to look at him and say, you know what I'm supposed to be that way too. I've got to represent him. So let us point the way to Jesus and let us not be afraid to speak the truth.

God bless you