

The Birth of John the Baptist (June 24, 2012)

He Must Increase

We celebrate the Feast of the nativity of John the Baptist, cousin of Jesus, precursor of the Messiah, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

John said of his relationship with Jesus, "He must increase, I must decrease." Recently someone reminded me of another relationship, the dates that the Church chose for the celebration of their births. Jesus, the light of the world, was born just after the winter solstice when the days begin to grow longer. John, who said he must decrease, was born just after the summer solstice when the days begin to grow shorter. He must increase. I must decrease. Of course, that only works in the northern hemisphere. That wouldn't work if you lived in Australia.

Still, there is a lesson for us there, as we now watch the days begin to grow shorter. We can be reminded that this is an ideal for us as well. Jesus must become more important in our lives and in our world while we learn to be humble and self-effacing as we help others come to him.

Here is a second lesson we can learn from John the Baptist: nothing is impossible for God. Remember when Mary asked the angel how she was to become a mother since she had no husband? The angel told her about her cousin, Elizabeth, who was well past the age of child-bearing and had never been able to have a child, but was now six months pregnant because nothing was impossible for God.

Nothing is impossible for God. It's good for us to remember that, especially at those moments when we might be discouraged by those seemingly impossible things Jesus asks us to do. You know, like "Love your enemies; do good to those who hurt you." Or just simply when life seems to overwhelm us, and we don't know what the future holds in store, and we think things are so completely out of control that we'll never get it together again. That's when we will all have to remember: nothing is impossible for God

I wonder if John the Baptist was ever discouraged once he realized

the enormity of what God was asking him to do. For centuries his people had yearned for the coming of the Messiah. His job was to say, "He's here. Get ready for him. Reform your lives. Prepare the way of the Lord." His message seems somewhat harsh. He called the people a brood of vipers and asked them who had shown them how to flee from the wrath of God. He said, "Turn away from your sins and be ready to accept the salvation that is at hand."

When people came to John and asked him what they were to do, he said, "If you have two coats, share with whoever has none, and whoever has food should also share." He told tax collectors to be honest and not to exact more than they should. He instructed soldiers to rob no one by violence or false accusations and to be content with their wages. His message was basically spiritual. Repent and turn away from your sins. But the way to do that seems to be simply by accepting the responsibilities of their station in life. In other words: be the person you are supposed to be. Accept the responsibilities of your position and live them faithfully. And that way you will be pleasing to God.

Like the prophets of old or even the prophets of the present day, his message was not always welcome, especially by those in high positions. He defied Herod the king and publicly reproached him for marrying his brother's wife, and for that he also incurred the wife's anger as well, was arrested, and eventually put to death.

John's chief function seems to have been to point out Jesus, to say, "There he is. There is the one who is to come. There is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." And having done that and encouraged his followers to follow Jesus, he vanished from the scene. Jesus takes over. Truly Jesus increases while John decreases. He is a model both of prophet and disciple. We could well learn from him. Our own lives would be well spent if they were occupied by pointing out Jesus, saying, "There he is," then getting out of the way and letting Jesus take over. A frequent prayer that we might all whisper this day, is, "He must increase. I must decrease."