

## From the desk of Fr. Jim

### HAPPY BIRTHDAY JOHN THE BAPTIST

One of the most interesting feast days in the Christian calendar is that of the Birth of John the Baptist. It is interesting from the standpoint of who John was and the manner of the celebration of his day.

John was the son of Elizabeth and Zachariah. He was the forerunner of Jesus, the Messiah. The Gospel provides us with a fascinating account of his life and his role in the event of salvation. His birth story is significant. Even though such stories are reserved for the very famous in the world, John's is significant because it reveals the direct intervention of God, for the purpose of accomplishing his plan of salvation.

This manner of God's involvement is signified in the fact that Elizabeth and Zachariah are barren. Such an experience always raises doubts and sorrow, and the same is true for this couple. Zachariah's doubt-filled reaction to the mystical announcement of the impending pregnancy leads to his being struck dumb, unable to speak. Elizabeth's pregnancy receives its second honor by being the mark in time to signal the coming of the Messiah, the promised gift of redemption.

*In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." (Luke 1:26-28)*

It is this "sixth month" that is one of the most fascinating features of the liturgical remembrance of the birth of John the Baptist.

From time to time there are expressions in books and movies concerning the possible existence of various ancient and secret codes that are supposed to unlock some hidden truth about the world in which we live. The idea of a code might make us nervous, even more so if it is a secret. There are, in fact, many mysteries sprinkled throughout the Holy Scriptures. Paul speaks of them this way:

*To me, the very least of all the holy ones, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the inscrutable riches of Christ, and to bring to light (for all) what is the plan of the mystery hidden from ages past in God who created all things, (Ephesians 3:8-9)*

So, if there is something in the teachings of Jesus or his disciples that could be understood as a "secret" code, the first thing we need to recognize is that it is not secret at all, any longer. It is, as St. Paul says, brought to light for all through the revelation of Jesus Christ. Even more, it is visible in the very structure of the universe. God's fingerprints are all over his creation.

This being the case, we should not be surprised that there are things about nature and life that, in fact, reflect God's plan. We can see this in the order of the features of our world. The movement of the sun

and stars, the majesty of the mountains, the power of a thunderstorm, the stillness of a summer night, the purity of a snowfall, the untouchable nature of a lava flow, the mystery of the depths of the ocean are all reflections of characteristics of God. They are not, as the ancients thought, gods, but evidence that "God has been here." God made these things. One of the first challenges of the evangelism of the Church was to convince people of this. The most popular religions of the time were various examples of what is called animism, the idea that nature was charged with some kind of supernatural electricity. The stars were gods, rivers, waterfalls, mountains, the sun - were all understood as being gods. One of the most interesting effects of the preaching of the Gospel was to show how God had ordered it in the beginning to reflect the story of redemption, the salvation of the world that has come through Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist's birthday is celebrated six months prior to Christmas in accord with the information provided by the Archangel Gabriel:

*"And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren."* **(Luke 1:36)**

In older calendars, Christmas was celebrated on the fixed date of the winter solstice. In pagan worship this was the celebration of the birthday of the sun, when the sun began to regain its prominence through a higher appearance in the sky and longer days. December 25th was declared by the Roman emperor Aurelian to be the celebration of "Sol Invictus," the invincible sun. The idea that this is the exact date of the birthday of Jesus is novel, and would mean that God has been very shrewd in his selection of the date of the birth of the Son of God. Even though the summer solstice is a moving date (this year on the 21st), the feast of the Birth of John the Baptist was on the fixed date of the summer solstice in older calendars. This is the date when the sun begins to decline in prominence. This reflects the statement which John made regarding himself:

The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. *He must increase; I must decrease.* The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things. But the one who comes from heaven is above all.

**(John 3:29-31)**