

Mary, John the Baptist and holiness in our lives

There is an order of precedence in the Church's list of Saints. The first one is obvious, Mary Mother of our Lord. The second may not seem so obvious – it is John the Baptist. These two premier saints are the only ones whose birth is celebrated, all the other saints it is the day of their death. Saint Luke goes into great detail about John's conception, birth and naming. Though his martyrdom is commemorated on 29th August his main festival is his nativity on 24th June. In addition to his festival dates his mission is also celebrated on the second and third Sundays of Advent, and again on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. John and Our Lady are significant in that they represent the completion and flowering of the Old Testament. The mission of Israel was to prepare the world for the Christ and is made actual in their lives and holiness. Both Our Lady and John are also the inauguration of the New Covenant.

However, if Advent is our preparation for the Christmas celebration – the birth of our Saviour, why do we have Saint John the Baptist for two of the four Sundays of Advent? I personally like having John in this season as he is the exact opposite of the Californian Father Christmas. Not that I wish gloom and doom for Christmas, but John reminds us of what we are actually celebrating and Whom it is that we are welcoming. Listen to his words, *'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.'* The invitation to Communion in the traditional Mass, as the priest shows the Blessed Sacrament with John's words, *'Behold the Lamb of God'*.

So, it is sweet Baby Jesus for Christmas, but also our Lord God, Judge and Saviour, who comes to be the Lamb of Sacrifice at Calvary. That is what John understood and why he bows down to his Lord and God.

There is another aspect about John and Our Lady. Mary as a woman and John as a man are relevant models to *all* Christians, because both discovered the total way in belonging to Christ. You see, for most of us, we wish to be *good* Christians, but we shy away from being *holy* ones. There is a suspicion that if I give myself totally and utterly to God, I will lose myself and my identity. So, we are tempted to think that we need to keep some part of myself for myself. There is also another fact – the myth in our modern culture that being too religious is silly and at worse boring.

John and Mary took risks and dispossessed and emptied themselves before God – *and yet* – we see them as coming into a true possession of who they really are, because they truly aligned themselves upon the Saviour. Down the centuries this is repeated. Francis of Assisi was a wealthy, silly young man, but when he gave that away and totally gave himself over, he became a truly great human being. Being a true and complete human being *is* union with Christ and, incidentally, holy.

Well? We may not be of the heroic stature of these saints, but these great saints achieved holiness because they laid hold of the grace of God that made this all possible. When the Apostles thought that Jesus' teaching and demands were impossible *'They were astonished beyond measure, saying among themselves, "Who then can be saved?"* Our Lord's response is for us, *"With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."* Being a Christian is a work in progress – a people on a journey.