

John the Prophet, Forerunner & Baptist of the Lord.

As was mentioned last week there are three Sundays in Advent given over to John the Baptist (in the traditional mass). This ascetic, uncompromising, and stern man is the embodiment of Advent. This does not mean we cannot be joyful and celebrate Christmas at Mass and with our families. However, John helps us with the wider context in understanding the great significance of the Feast. Yes, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, but John reminds us of the identity of the Child and the purpose of the Incarnation: our salvation, and for that purpose he is born for us to die for us. The wood of the Crib will become the wood of the Cross.

John's mission is short – maybe for only 10 to 16 months. He emerges from the wilderness beyond the Jordan and he dressed exactly like the great Elijah the Prophet who brought judgement upon the kingdom of northern Israel because he defended the Covenant against the inroads of paganism – he was a real pain for King Ahaz and his pagan Queen Jezebel. He personally cut the throats of Jezebel's pagan priests! Finally, he receives a vision and command that will inaugurate a coup d'état against the king and queen. However, that is not the end of the matter, as Malachi prophesised Elijah's return, '*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse*' (Malachi 4:5-6).

It is no wonder that the appearance of John was a cause of anxiety for the priestly rulers of Judea and, in today's Gospel reading, we hear of their official delegation to check him out. They are not just worried about John but what he heralds, '*the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD*'.

However, John does not admit to being Elijah, the Christ, or another expected figure called 'the Prophet'. Instead he is a forerunner – a herald that announces the coming of a unique Person. In ancient times an imminent royal or imperial visitation to a city was announced by a forerunner. It is to Him that John points. John's description is to a Person that is much more than another prophet, '*There standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose*'. When we look at the Christmas Creche and look upon the Infant, we also need the words of John at the back of our mind to remind us what we are looking at.

There is another aspect of John's ministry that is overlooked - where exactly was he baptising? Origen, the great biblical scholar of Alexander AD 184- 253, who tracked that down to a location called 'Crossing', which marked the spot where Joshua and the Children of Israel crossed over into the Promised land and became a people. John, however, is on the other side calling them out of the land to repent of the failure to the covenant and to be the legitimate Children of Israel. They had to leave the land and re-enter it by baptism as the new People of God, ready to be the ones to welcome the Christ and the New Covenant. For every great celebrations of the Church's year should also be for us a time to prepare to renew our Baptismal life in Christ