

Nativity of John the Baptist — 24 June 2018



Isaiah 40.1-11 (AV) / Ps 85 / Acts 13.14b-26 / Luke 1.57-66,80

As John was finishing his work, he said,
'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he.'



In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

Zechariah was speechless — but even if he did not mime to dear, aged Elizabeth the message he had received from the incense angel, even if he did not avail himself of the wax tablet to write her a message about this extraordinary conception, Elizabeth did not need Zechariah mansplaining to her that something miraculous had taken place. In the course of a few months, Elizabeth and Zechariah experienced angelic revelations, supernatural conception, an interuterine salutation, the world premieres of the *Benedictus* and *Magnificat*, and various other extravagant divine interventions.

The ordination of a new priest is not usually *quite* so marvellous, and perhaps we should not judge Father N. N. according to the standards set by the unique role of the glorious Prophet and Forerunner John the Baptist.

At the same time, we ought not take for granted the making of a new priest among us is an entirely quotidian affair, either. The church confesses that the imposition of the grace of holy order confers a new,

indelible quality on the priest: the N. whom we knew and loved as student, as a school-teacher, as a reveller, as a son, brother, a beloved, has been truly, effectually changed, *forever*. And the changes we dare to expect to see in our priest Father N. N. are not altogether unlike qualities suggested in our observation of the Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist.

We hope, for example, to see in our priest the outworking of manifest holiness. John signified this by his abstinence from wine and strong drink, his ascetical insectivorous diet, and his very plain attire.... Since not *every* characteristic of holiness is manifest *equally* in *all* who aspire to sanctity, we need not look for exactly these qualities in any *particular* priest — but we do, *very fairly*, expect our clergy to express the holiness toward which their lives are oriented in detectable ways. *All* the baptised share in the priestly ministry of faith, hope, and charity; we pray for clergy, though, in whom these virtues constitute the consistent, *evident* grounding of their very identity. To your priests has been entrusted the stewardship of the Church's treasures: the sacraments, the doctrine, and particularly Christ's precious brothers and sisters who are beset by troubles physical, material, or spiritual. Thus John the Baptist taught that those who have more than the minimum must share with those with nowt, that those who have power over debt collection or public order must not use their power to extort from the needy; John taught and exemplified the sanctity, righteousness, and truthfulness for which the Spirit empowers each priest.

We trust our new priest to recognise Christ, and to guide us, to guide *everyone*, to Christ's way of salvation. The Church teaches that a

priest stands and acts *in persona Christi Capitis* — that is, as the personal agent of Christ the Head. But how can the priest take up Christ's ministry of serving if they do not themselves have a clear vision of who Christ is? Toward whom, or what, will the priest lead a congregation, who does not know Christ? *Especially* in the hurly-burly of the great city, the priest (whom God has called and the church has formed and whom the Holy Spirit fills with understanding) must point to Christ, must help a congregation distinguish the way of Christ from mere common sense, from the ideologies of hustings or the market. And as one who shares the prophetic ministry of Christ, your priest must sometimes speak a word before its time, *before* our neighbours or our government or our journalists or even church authorities have sussed it out. John was preaching that the time had come near, that we must repent and prepare for the Kingdom, before Jesus arrived on the scene and took over that message. *That's all right* — John's calling, like the priest's calling, is to focus our attention, *all* attention, on Christ, looking ahead to Christ.

And that brings us to the verse from tonight's lesson from Acts: 'And as John was finishing his work, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? *I am not he.*' Each of the gospels underscores this point. When Judeans sent priests and Levites to ask him 'Who are you?', he acknowledged, 'I am not the Messiah.' When the *crowds* are wondering whether a scraggly prophet from the riverside might be the Messiah, he stridently refuses that honour: 'I am not worthy to tie the strap of his sandals.' When Jesus comes to him for baptism, John asks that Christ baptise *him*. When John's disciples moan that Jesus has taken over

John's baptising mission, John reminds them the purpose of his ministry; John came to prepare people to recognise and follow Jesus. 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' This, too, echoes in the ministry of the priest. Those whom we ordain have volunteered for a strait and hard way with few concrete rewards, which subjects them to the persistent temptation to infuse themselves into the gospel they proclaim. *By no means!* Our priest must keep ever before his eyes the Baptist's motto that building up the congregation, promulgating the gospel, upholding the Church's teaching all should overshadow the popularity of the priest, who is above all a *servant* of the children of God.

This applies most especially to the role we often associate distinctively with the priest, that of making Christ present in the sacraments: baptising, anointing, absolving, blessing, and — uniquely — feeding us with the holy food and drink from the altar. At precisely the moment when all are silent, when all gazes are fixed on the centre of the altar, there and at that moment the temptation to bring one's self into the spotlight can be hardest to decline. Yet there above *all* times our priest is under a charge not to put him- or herself forward. We have come to see *Jesus*, to hear *his* word, and to receive *him* in the sacrament of the altar. The more we are inclined to attend to the personality at the altar, the less we are inclined to attend to the *persona* of Christ, and the less we are drawn out of ourselves into a more nearly divine realm. Christ must increase, and we must decrease — and thereby discover the truth about ourselves in the clarity of his presence.

In holiness of life, in the recognition of Christ, in gentle, humble service, and in making Christ the manifest focus of the ministry, our

priest takes up prominent aspects of John the Baptist's own ministry — and tonight we gather to pray with longing hearts as Father N. takes up the yoke of priesthood in our midst. But God does not eradicate the selfhood of the priest. Rather, as in all the instances of divine grace in action, God takes up what is congruent with the divine calling and perfects it to divine ends. Father N. N. our priest is still our friend N., distilled and (heaven permitting) purified, the Spirit's grace filling him for new dimensions and degrees of service to Christ, and to his Body, the Church.

Finally — all we have observed about our new priest's *special*-ness, his changed nature and his role as servant of Christ, applies also to *all* the baptised. We who share in the royal priesthood of the people of God *share* the call to holiness of life, the call to recognise Christ among the idols and ideologies of our day, to proclaim the gospel, to make Christ manifest to the world, and to walk humbly with our Lord. Our priest exemplifies, teaches, encourages, reproaches, forgives, but never *substitutes* for our calling.

For the day of fulfilment has come upon us, sisters and brothers; the year of sacerdotal gestation has come to an end. A new priest is born among us, and we, with Zechariah, with our tongues loosed, can join in saying 'His name is... N. N.!' And led by our new priest, we can hear again, affirm, and spread abroad the message of John the Baptist: 'Brothers and sisters, children of Abraham and others who fear God, to us Christ's message of salvation has been sent!'

Amen