

BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

The summer solstice at Stonehenge this year had a completely different feel about it. Apart from a few who had ignored the advice to stay away because of social distancing, the rising of the Sun penetrating the circle of stones which have fascinated and held the imagination of people for millennia, was televised, live streamed so that the public did not miss out. Estimates suggest that over 3 million people watched the event.

The event, for some has a deep spiritual significance for others it is a reminder that we have reached the point in the year of the longest day and now we prepare ourselves to see the days shortening and the evenings lengthening. To begin with it is not noticeable; we are only dealing in seconds, and by August we will only lose 2 minutes of daylight.

This is all very interesting but what has it to do with the Nativity of John the Baptist? Theologically it is highly significant. The birth of John was an incredibly important event in the economy of our salvation, as he comes as the precursor to the Advent of Jesus, to prepare souls for his coming. As the Archangel Gabriel announced, "He shall go before the face of the Lord to give unto the people the knowledge of Salvation."

John's birth falls a few days after the longest day and from here on in the daylight becomes shorter and the light begins to fail until that moment when Christ appears in December, a few days after the shortest day when the daylight lasts longer and the light increases. From a Christian perspective, and within a liturgical framework, these events are a sanctification of time. Viewed from the perspective of the birth of John as the light turns towards shortening and the birth of Jesus as the light begins to increase, it becomes a commentary on the mission of John and the mission of Jesus. John, for a moment shines but then recedes into the background, his light diminishes and finally extinguishes as he stands back and allows the light of Christ to increase and finally shine fully with the light of Heaven itself.

John puts the truth of this experience into words we are familiar with but have a hard time putting into practice. In the third Chapter of John's Gospel he says, "I must decrease and He must increase." Lessons of humility and of mission can be learned from this simple yet profound truth. Humility is not a virtue

that comes easy to people, especially in a culture that pursues celebrity and fame above all other things. We see ourselves constantly in competition with each other for recognition and plaudits and feel slighted when we don't get the recognition we think we deserve. This is all characteristic of the sin of Pride, the opposite disposition to humility. Equally, as John grasped the importance of his relationship to Jesus, he knew that for the Gospel to be heard and for lives to be transformed he must get out of the way; he must not be an obstacle or a distraction to Jesus and his work. He must decrease.

Contemplating the person of John the Baptist is a sure remedy against Pride and against diverting attention away from Christ; that is our calling as well as his. He was set apart before his birth to prepare souls for acts of repentance and to point towards the Lamb of God. His life and actions are fundamental to our own calling as those who point to the saviour of the world.

When we are sent out at the end of mass, we leave the intimate company of Christ in the Holy Sacrament and share the gifts, the graces of that intimacy with others. We point to the one who first called us, by letting go of ego and pride and the temptation to increase in the estimation of others, and by doing so we show Jesus, we let others see his radiance because he lives in us.

St John The Baptist, Pray for us.

AMEN