

SERMON AT MASS BIRTH OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST 2012.

It's well-known that the number of rival claims of possession of the relics of a saint testifies to the importance of that saint in the consciousness of the Christian community.

In that case, John the Baptist is extremely important.

Claims abound.

His head is alleged to be in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, as well as in the church of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome.

Amiens Cathedral has a head brought back from the fourth crusade, and there are reports of various bits and pieces in Antioch, southern France, Serbia, Istanbul, Egypt.

And Halifax.

He is prominent because he is seen as the precursor of Jesus – a relative in fact, and the result of a miraculous birth to elderly parents, his mother being well past the age of child-bearing.

His progress in the New Testament is tracked with enthusiasm, and in Mark's Gospel there is a minutely-detailed account of his execution, which has inspired many artists – from Giotto to Caravaggio to Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley.

But it is his birth – not often explored, that we are concerned with today, and part of Luke's account forms today's Gospel reading.

Luke is always anxious to emphasise the hand of God at work in human affairs, and the miraculous birth is a further sign of God moving in history to reveal his offer of salvation.

In some ways the quaintness of the story diminishes our ability to draw out its meaning.

But there are clues to its significance which repay attention.

The child is brought to circumcision at the age of eight days.

This enables Luke to remind his gentile audience that the Christian movement emerges out of Judaism and is indeed an authentic development of it.

The choice of the name *John* means that the priestly name *Zechariah* is abandoned, breaking the priestly succession and heralding the dawn of messianic salvation.

Those who saw what happened and heard the name wondered *What will this child turn out to be?*

And it is the unfolding of that life which should concern us as we seek to respond to the call to discipleship which remains crucial to the Church's life in every age.

It is the pattern of the life of John the Baptist that is our guide.

This doesn't mean that we should all spend years in the desert eating locusts and wild honey.

Nor that we should dress in camel hair clothing and wear leather loin cloths.

These might cause comment, but they would not advance the cause of the Gospel.

No.

The clue to the significance of John, oddly enough, lies in the way he fits into the calendar.

Not only is the celebration of his birth exactly six months before (or after) Christmas, but both festivals coincide with the summer and winter solstices

This is partly due to the Church's having taken over two pagan Roman festivals.

But it also has a deep theological significance.

On the one hand you have the Christ, in the depths of winter, the rising sun that illuminates the world.

In the face of this, John, a burning and a shining light in the heat of summer, is to decrease as he leads towards the light of Christ.

He must increase, I must decrease.

He came as a witness, to bear witness to the light, so that everyone might believe through him.

He was not the light, he was to bear witness to the light.

The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone; he was coming into the world.

And so John is a sign of the vocation of all Christian people, us included.

We are here not merely to contemplate our own future in eternity.

We are here to bear witness to the Light which is Christ.

To worship God and to serve one another in this community.

But also to draw others into the Church's life.

To draw attention not to ourselves, but to the One who brought us here

We may all think we are weak and lacking in eloquence, but we all have within us the capacity to be forerunners of the Lord.

We can all be messengers of joy.

If we are not, then who will be?

In today's world it is often the joyless prophets of doom who are heard and rightly ignored by the mass of people.

Often those who would consign countless thousands of good people to the eternity of hell who grab the headlines who receive the opprobrium of decent, rational society.

But the mainstream of the Church's life – the day-today round of prayer, worship and witness, remains largely unknown, perhaps unremarkable.

And yet in the heart of this community is the single truth that gives the reason for our survival, for the Church's continued existence.

That God is love and invites us to love.

It is not a soft, sentimental option.

For the full extent of God's love brought about a death.

Yes, and it brought about the death of John the Baptist too.

The good news of God's love for all is in our hands.

In our hands.

We can help lead others to faith and sustain them in it.

Energised by this most holy Sacrament we have the capacity to shed joy on the world that God so loves.

Through our commitment and common life, the rumour of God can become a reality for many.

John is here to remind the Church , the preachers of the Gospel and all believers, that they must make way for the One they announce and whose path they prepare.

They are there to point away from themselves to the One whose name is Love.

He must increase, I must decrease.