

**The Least in the Kingdom Greater than John the Baptist**    **Nativity of St. John the Baptist**    Friday, June 24, 2016    7:30 PM    Is 49:1-6;    Acts 3:22-26;    **Lk 1:57-66, 80**  
(We have the calling to embody the kingdom of God, the power of God, in our very lives, in our bodies, our souls, our minds, our whole being.)

There are only two births celebrated in the ancient liturgy of the Church. One of course is the Nativity of Christ the other is the Nativity of John the Baptist. They are both solemnities, major feast days. But neither really commemorate a date, since **we don't know when either John the Baptist or Jesus was born, and it doesn't matter.**

**We celebrate these dates because of the significance that their birth has for the world and for the universe.** We celebrate the birth of Christ at the winter solstice because from the winter solstice onward the days become longer, and that signifies that the light is getting more prominent in the world. And **that is the role of Christ to bring the light of God into the world and to expand ever gradually.** John the Baptist, on the other hand, is celebrated on the **summer solstice** or right after because from now on the days, sad to say, are getting slightly shorter each day. **It's John the Baptist who said, "I must decrease while he must increase."**

Now there is a very important reality that John points to, his own decrease, because Jesus himself said that, **"No man born of woman is greater than John the Baptist."** That is quite a statement. But he added, **"And yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."** That's something we have to think about. What does that mean? Well, human beings are created in the image of God, and we have certain very good natural tendencies, among them the tendency to worship God, desire God. This is where we get natural religion from. And along with that goes a desire for virtue, which is good. But the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. John the Baptist is the symbol of, the representative of, **the best that human nature has produced.** That's why Jesus said, "No man born of woman is greater." He is a man of extraordinary devotion, justice, dedication, loyalty, commitment, and so on. But the kingdom of God is not simply about human virtues or even human love of God. **The kingdom of God is about God unleashing his power within human beings,** and that's different. **So the least in the kingdom is greater than he.**

Now we are all called to the kingdom. We are not called to be exemplars of virtue, even if it's wonderful if we are. And surely we do not want to say that religious devotion is bad, although there are some theologians who say that in deference to the power of God in faith; but we needn't say that. But we have to recognize the great calling that we have, **the calling to embody the kingdom of God, the power of God, in our very lives, in our bodies, our souls, our minds, our whole being. Jesus is the model that we are called to follow.**

If you look at John's work, he was a precursor of Christ; but was a **precursor of Christ in a rather odd way.** He foresaw. He led to the one who was totally different from himself. John's message was actually rather what people call "fire and brimstone." It was harsh. It was not inviting. It was not welcoming. **It was demanding.** And that is actually rather natural, especially for those who strive, those who really work hard at being good, at being virtuous. Those who are accomplished can become harsh with those who aren't, who don't, who haven't. **So it's very important we realize what God is really inviting us into is not something we accomplish or**

**we succeed in. It's all gift**—all gift. And because it's all gift **we have no real reason for harshness or for comparisons or for any kind of demanding quality.** That isn't God's way. That wasn't Jesus. He was challenging, that's true, but not demanding. There is a difference. He called forth the best, but he brought more than the best and gave it as gift.

Now people mistook John the Baptist for the Messiah. He said, **“The one you think I am I am not. But there is one coming after me whose sandal I am not worthy to loosen.”** Now of course loosening a sandal was the job of a disciple. **A disciple was a servant,** a valet, a cook. A disciple did the laundry of his master. And John the Baptist was saying there I'm not even worthy to be his disciple. But **Jesus is calling you to be his disciple.** Think about that. At the Last Supper he said, “I no longer call you servants”—which is typical, that's what disciples were—he says, **“Now I call you friends.”** St. Thomas says a friend is one who shares: **what's mine is yours, what's yours is mine.** God in Christ is saying what's mine is yours, what's yours is mine. Are we ready for this unity, for this communion? God isn't waiting for us to shine. God isn't waiting for us to achieve. God isn't waiting for us to succeed even in the loftiest way. But **God is waiting for us to surrender,** to surrender to him, to his love and power, to his justice and his mercy. **He wants us to be like him. “I call you friends.”** The least in the kingdom of God is greater than the greatest born of woman. We have to think through these various parabolic statements and **realize the great vocation to which we are called.**

John the Baptist really wasn't a disciple of Jesus. Many people today who call themselves Christians aren't either, but we all are called to be. In fact, **Jesus' plan is to make all nations disciples.** That's the mandate. To be a disciple means **we have to be constantly learning** what is God all about, and never to think we really know for sure, because **we are involved in a deep mystery, and we can never describe it in so many words.** It's good to have words. We have the creed. The creed is full of good, correct words describing some aspects of this great mystery, but only some aspects, a vague outline, not the inner core. This can only be penetrated by the heart, Cardinal Newman's motto: **“cor ad cor loquitur,” the heart speaks to the heart.** St. Bonaventure—his whole theology is a theology of the heart, God working in us, speaking to us, not in so many words, but in the vibrations of **God moving us to desire what God desires.** This is a great calling. In a way John the Baptist was the last prophet who wasn't called to this great vocation. He was called to a vocation. He served God. We celebrate his victory with Christ as martyr and witness. “But the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”