

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, 2008

*“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John ...
He was not the light, but was to give testimony of the light.”*
(Jn. 1:6–8)

Although today we celebrate the feast of St Peter, the first Pope, and the great Apostle to the Gentiles, St Paul, I would like to turn our minds to the Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist celebrated five days earlier. One of the greatest of the early Fathers of the Church tells us: “Apart from the most holy solemnity commemorating our Saviour’s birth, the Church keeps the birthday of no other person except that of John the Baptist.”¹ For other Saints the Church solemnises the day they were reborn to everlasting happiness; but for John the day of his birth, the day on which he began this mortal life is likewise sacred because the Lord willed to announce to men His own coming through the Baptist. There is a similarity between the event of Christ’s birth



and that of John the Baptist. Notice how our Saviour was born as December 24th was spent, at the hour of midnight. A moment the Church sings of as “In the deep mid-winter.” The nativity of the Baptist is celebrated on June 24th, mid-summer’s day. Both Jesus and John were given their names by God through the Archangel Gabriel; we recall how at the Baptist’s birth the gathering of friends and neighbours said he should be named Zachary; but Elizabeth inspired by the Holy Ghost said his name “is John”. As Zachary was made dumb because of his doubt, he could not have told Elizabeth what Gabriel said to him. But when he was given a writing tablet, he wrote: “John is his name.” The Archangel Gabriel said: “Fear not Zachary, for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John: and thou shalt have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice in his nativity.” That “many” includes ourselves. His birth was the “dawn of salvation”, the appearance in this world of the forerunner of the Messiah. Six months before our Saviour’s birth, that of John the Baptist shared in the grandeur of the mystery of the Incarnation which it heralded. So that in the Middle Ages it was celebrated as the Summer Christmas, with three Masses just as there are three on Christmas Day itself. Indeed before the Protestant Reformation there was always great rejoicing on that feast-day. William Shakespeare composed the *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to be performed outdoors as part of the rejoicings after the great ceremonies in church were over.

¹ St Augustine. (The feasts of the Immaculate Conception and of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin had not yet been introduced.)

Why is it that we no longer rejoice in the glorious feasts of the Church? What kind of joys are we seeking; what preoccupies our thinking? Are we becoming attached to the things of this world; to joys that are fleeting and fade so quickly away; is our destiny here on earth more important than the joys of the Kingdom of God? If only we could grasp the importance of living according to the mind of God's family! The only way is a deeper knowledge of spiritual things; indeed of Christ Himself as God's revelation to mankind; as the divine model of the perfection to which each of us is called — perfection revealed in great part by John the Baptist. His name comes after our Lady and St Michael in the Confiteor; throughout the liturgy he is presented to us: "Among those born of woman there has not arisen a greater than John the Baptist."² The great event of the Visitation was willed by God. As soon as Jesus was conceived He willed that Mary should visit her cousin Elizabeth so that He could sanctify the child in her womb — who leapt for joy at His presence; and Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit proclaimed Mary to be "the Mother of my Lord"³. There is so much for us to wonder at and truly rejoice. As we call upon our heavenly Mother for her help beg her to help us also to have a deeper insight into these great wonders of God so that we desire St John the Baptist ever to continue in us this role of Forerunner which was his on earth, by guiding our souls away from attachment to the pleasures of this world to Jesus, the Way, the Truth, the Life, so that heavenly things may be our chief desire.

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² Matt. 11:11

³ Lk. 1:43