

ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

If you were on holiday on the island of Menorca on 24TH June, the feast day of St. John the Baptist, there would be huge fireworks displays, all to honour their patron, San Juan. He captured the imagination of the people of Spain, Portugal, and South American countries that were part of their empires. There are two feast days to help us celebrate him:

24TH June, celebrating his birth.

29TH August, remembering his martyrdom by King Herod.

Of all the stories about St. John, the story of his birth has always fascinated me.

His parents were Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was a holy man, and one day while praying in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him. He told Zechariah that his wife would give birth to a boy and that they were to name him JOHN.

Zechariah told the angel that this was impossible as he and his wife were too old to have children. The angel told Zechariah that as he had doubted God's abilities, his punishment was that he would be dumb until the day he named the boy.

Elizabeth did have a boy, and when friends and neighbours gathered to celebrate the birth, they asked what name the baby would be given. She said, John. They were all amazed because the custom at that time was to name a boy after the father or someone revered in the family, and they knew of no one called John. They turned to the dumb Zechariah and asked him. He wrote down JOHN, and immediately, he could speak.

Elizabeth's cousin Mary was also involved at that time. She, too, had been told by the angel Gabriel that she was to have a child, and she was to name him Jesus. While pregnant, she visited the pregnant Elizabeth, who told her that when they met, the child in her womb leapt. Both women knew that they had been blessed by God and that there was something holy and special about the boys they would have.

John was a great saint who was held in great esteem at other times and places. He continually taught about the coming of a Messiah and that people should repent of their sins.

The people at that time were hopeful of the coming of the Messiah, and hearing a special holy man like John continually stating it must have given them real hope.

He also knew how sinful people could be and never refrained from telling them they should repent. This message of repentance is as

relevant today as it was then, but with the sacrament of Reconciliation available today, we have a great answer for it.

Whenever I hear or read stories from the Bible, I always look for God's wisdom and mercy, which we know are beyond our comprehension, yet I still do it. It's now a hobby of mine and a great help. Take John's death as an example. He was around the same age as Jesus, who we're told was 33 years old when he died. Is there any great wisdom of God behind John's death?

Why did God allow St. John to die so young and by cruel means, especially as he'd done such a great job? We can only guess, but was this God's way of saying thank you? You've done your job and done it well. You don't have to wait any longer to live with me in the wonder of heaven for all eternity; you can have it all now. Is this why God takes some people at a very young age? It's always a sad time for those who loved the deceased, but would we like them to come back from heaven and live a human life? I like to think we wouldn't be so selfish.

The story of John's cruel death is great. Herod had married his dead brother's wife. This type of marriage was against Jewish law and, therefore, sinful. His wife, who was called Herodias, already had a beautiful daughter called Salome. They plotted St. John's death because he preached often and loudly against Herod marrying Herodias. Did God make sure that St. John's death was gruesome so that the story would be remembered, warning people about sinning?

John had done his job faithfully but lost faith a little while in prison. Who wouldn't in the same circumstances?

When in prison, he sent messengers to Our Lord asking explicitly for Jesus to say if he was the one to come, or ought they to look for someone else? Jesus gave the answer we know, about the dumb speaking, the deaf hearing, all the signs of the coming of a Messiah fulfilled, and he gently reprimanded John saying:

“Blessed is the man who does not lose faith in me.”

Soon after this, John was cruelly executed. He'd lived a hermit's life in the desert before he began his mission to prepare the way of the Lord. When he saw Jesus, he quickly said he was unimportant compared to the one whose sandal he was not worthy to fasten.

St. John's most extraordinary claim to fame was the tribute to him by Jesus himself.

**“Of all the men born of woman,
a greater than John
had never been seen.”**

I always like to remember that priests use John's very words in the prayer he says before Holy Communion, as he raises the Body and Blood of the Lord:

**“Behold, the Lamb of God,
behold him who takes away
the sins of the world.”**

Don't forget to celebrate the two feast days of St John. I do not doubt that John, along with the other holy people who were so close to Jesus during his time on earth, is now enjoying eternal happiness with God in heaven. Never hesitate to ask them to intercede with God on your behalf.