

Today, dear friends, we are celebrating the solemnity of the birth of John the Baptist. John the Baptist, who was **a great religious reformer** and was sent by God **to prepare the people of Israel to receive the promised Messiah**. He was to announce to everyone that the **Messiah has finally arrived** and to help people to get ready to receive their Savior. John's vocation was a selfless one; the only power that he claimed was the Spirit of Yahweh, "I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt.3:11). Scripture tells us that many people followed John, because they were looking to him for hope, perhaps in anticipation of some great Messianic power. John never allowed himself the false honor of receiving these people for his own glory. He knew his calling was one of preparation. At the appointed time, he led his disciples to Jesus: "The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said **Behold, the Lamb of God**" (Jn.1:29; 33).

John tells his disciples that **Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world**. He relates to them that after he baptized Jesus, he saw the Holy Spirit come upon the Lord (Jn. 1:29). John the Baptist's reference to Jesus as the Lamb of God brings to mind several images. Like other people of that time, John would have been familiar with the prophecies about the **future Messiah**, so he could have been referring to **the servant of the Lord** in Isaiah 53: 1-12, where the servant was presented as the one who would bring salvation to God's people by bearing their sufferings and sorrows. John, undoubtedly, would also have been referring to **the paschal lamb** in Exodus 12:3ff, who had effectively saved the Israelites **from annihilation** at the time of their escape from slavery in Egypt. Again, John Baptist would have been referring also to the story of Abraham's binding of his son, Isaac, in Genesis 22: 8-13, **where God provided the sacrificial lamb**, thereby, saving Isaac from death. John, who had long been preparing to announce the Messiah's arrival, would have had all these scripture passages in mind when referring to Jesus as **the Lamb of God**. Jesus would be **the one to destroy sin and thus bring salvation to the world**. John wanted to make clear the distinction between the Savior and himself, whose task was to prepare the people for the great saving work of Jesus.

The first reading of the vigil Mass defines John the Baptist's calling and his mission in the like manner like that of the prophet Jeremiah: **Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I consecrated you, and appointed you a prophet to the nations. I have placed my words in your mouth** (Jer.1:5, 9, and 10). The first reading from the Mass during the day also affirms the prophecy of Jeremiah as follows: The Lord called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name (Is.49:1). Like Jeremiah or Isaiah, John, too, was given the task of bringing the people back to God. In all the calling stories, there is always an objection about the call and a reassurance of divine protection (see the call of Moses Ex.3:11 and Jeremiah1:6 I am too young). Sometimes, all of us feel the same that we are not worthy of our vocation, but the good news is that God has called each one of us by name. God wants us to know that we too are capable of bringing about positive change the world is looking for now.

John the Baptist was born during an intertestamental period, and he serves as the boundary between the Old and the New Testaments. That he is a sort of boundary the Lord himself bears witness, when he speaks of the Law and the Prophets, until John the Baptist. Thus, he represents time past and is the herald of the new era to come. As a representative of the past, he was born by **aged parents** (Lk.1:7); as a herald of the new era, he was declared a prophet while he was **still in his mother's womb** (Lk.1:76).

Finally, beloved in Christ, the Gospel tells us that the birth of John the Baptist brought a deep joy not only to his parents and relatives but also Israel and the world as a whole. John the Baptist announces Christ to the world, and he prepared the people's hearts to receive Christ. In fact, like John the Baptist, it is our Christian calling to announce Christ to the world around us, and also to prepare the hearts of our brothers and sisters to accept Jesus as their Savior. By relying on God and by living virtuous lives, let us do our best to be like John the Baptist so that heaven will be ours. Amen!