

In our liturgical calendar

We celebrate only 2 birthdays other than Jesus'

Mary's and John the Baptist's

In fact, there are only a couple feasts that will bump the Sunday readings

And this is one of them

That shows how important John is to Christianity

How important he is to our salvation

We know Jesus is the Word made flesh

John gives voice to the Word

He points to the Word

And just when his ministry is booming

John points his disciples toward Christ

He points out that Jesus must increase

While I must decrease

In fact, even nature points to this

Jesus is the light of the world

When Jesus is born, the days begin to get longer

At the time we celebrate John's birth

The days begin to shorten

John is the last prophet

A title that has deep roots in Jewish history

Our first readings from the prophet Isaiah

Here the Israelite community has been in exile

But they are promised God would bring them back

Their return will be the work of God

It will not be from their own accomplishments

When they are gathered

They will be the light to the nations

For all nations

Including those at whose hands they suffered

In our second letter

Paul looks at David and John

David was the beginning of this family line

John is the end

David was virtually unknown

When Samuel came looking for the one God chose to replace Saul

His father didn't even consider his youngest son David

He was out doing an unimportant role

Looking after the sheep

But he was the one chosen by God

The one who would establish the monarchy that would produce
the messiah

John, too, came from humble origins

Born to aged parents

He lived on the outskirts of society

Yet when the time came

He was ready to fulfill his mission

Calling people to repentance

Proclaiming that '*the one is coming*'

This is John's greatness

Drawing people to himself

And pointing them to another

Something the Pharisees and Sadducees could never do

In our Gospel, we find friends and neighbors gathered together

They are prepared to name this child

In many cultures this is normal

For a child is not only an important addition to a family

They are important to the society as well

Bringing new life to the community as well as the family

They want to keep the family name going

With aged parents, they know this will be their only child

But Elizabeth and Zachariah say no

He will be called John

Meaning 'God is gracious'

The name the angel gave him before he was conceived

John was truly a chosen child

God had taken pity on his aged mother

Giving her a son

Zechariah was given back his voice

The neighbors and friends gathered did not know what to make of it

Except that he would be special

That God had big plans for this child

But John's life would not be about himself

It would be a life pointing to another

Preparing the way then

Helping us prepare our hearts today

John the Baptist shows us the way to God

He shows us humility

Humility is not about putting yourself down

It is not about denying your gifts or abilities

It is not about looking down on yourself

True humility is acknowledging that you have talents and gifts

Acknowledging that you have a mission not building up false pride

But looking away from yourself

Looking to another

Looking to 'The other'

The source of everything

To the source of life itself

Doing this in humility brings freedom

We recognize the gifts we have received

We have a dignity as God's sons and daughters

Rather than dominating others

We are free to recognize, honor and praise God as God

John teaches us that in our human dignity

We have rights and responsibilities

Not rights without responsibilities

That is entitlement

Not responsibilities without rights

That is slavery

As free children of God

We have rights

These rights do not come from the state

They come from God, and are recognized by the state

With these rights come responsibilities

We have a right to worship God

And a responsibility to worship him

Not as we choose

But as God chooses

What do we do when the state conflicts these?

We follow the example of the Baptist

Standing up and let our voice ring out with John's voice

Calling on the Word

Calling on the Truth

Today we had ordinations in La Crosse

We have weddings and baptisms often in our church

All of these are new beginnings

Full of promise

Full of challenges

For each individual

Within our vocation

We will have choices to make

We can follow the example of Herod

We can let our emotions and feelings drive us

We can refuse to take a stand

Or we can follow the example of John

In humility

Looking to another

Firm in our faith

Confident in our abilities

Strengthened by the grace of the sacraments

Ready to fulfill our mission

This is the challenge our bishops have given us

This is what the Fortnight for Freedom is about

It doesn't matter if we have fallen in the past

What matters is the choice we make today