

## NATIVITY OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

**I**t often surprises people that the Church gives such prominence to the feast of St John the Baptist. It even has a special Vigil Mass, and in the middle ages, yesterday was a day of fast and today a Holy Day of Obligation.

One of the stories told about St Dominic is that he was walking from Fanjeaux to the walled city of Carcassone when he saw some men working in the fields. He scolded them, for it was today's feast, and they should not be working. They were angry, retorting that it was no feast day for them – perhaps they were influenced by the Cathars, who regarded John the Baptist as a demon – and anyway, they intended to go on working. They waved their sickles menacingly at Dominic – but found they were dripping with blood, though no one was hurt. Of course, they dropped them, and ran away. Whatever you think about the truth of the story – I don't think it occurs in any of the early sources – it does illustrate how important this feast was for the Church of the time.

So why? And what possible importance does it have for us today? I am sure we could give several answers, but for me it comes down to this. John is the bridge from the Old to the New Testament: the last of the prophets, the one to welcome Jesus by leaping in his mother's womb and by pointing out the Lamb of God.

Last Sunday in the Gospel Jesus spoke of laying bare a great secret. “The hidden wisdom of God which we teach in our mysteries,” as St Paul calls it. This secret, this mystery, the revelation of God as Saviour and Redeemer, the lover of the human race, and of our destiny which is union with him in eternal life. This is God's hidden plan for the human race. Of course, it was one of those secrets hidden in plain sight. The prophets proclaimed it, the Jewish people lived it (especially in their exodus out of Egypt) and Jesus came to complete it. And it was John, speaking, as it were, for the whole Jewish tradition, who proclaimed, “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sin of the world.”

In the churches of the East, it is customary to paint the Virgin Mary on a panel of the iconostasis, and, on the other side, John the Baptist. John brings the Old Law to completion; Mary brings the New Law to birth.

Thus John is, as Jesus says, “greater than any man born of women”, and yet “the least in the kingdom is greater than he.”

- *Martin Wallace OP*  
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