

In the Church Kalendar, there are only three births celebrated: Jesus, Mary and John Baptist. John is an important fellow. In the Old Testament, when the Lord had a special task for someone, there was something unusual about the birth, usually the woman barren. It is a well known literary device in the Greek myths that heroes are born to women who are past childbearing or are virgins. In Holy Scripture, we have Sarah, Samuel's mother and Samson's mother. In the New Testament we have, today, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and of course Mary. John Baptist is the bridge from Old to New. The last of the straight-talkin', shootin' from the hip Old Testament Prophets, and the first of the New. And his straight talkin', shootin' from the hip message was REPENT – that is, *change direction*.

Repent – not to please God the headmaster so that we can get more benefits on some celestial insurance policy. No! Repent to free ourselves from lumber that weighs down the ship of life, and prevents us from living. Lumber like pride, prejudice, expectations, envy. *Notions*. Repent – so that we can be committed to the way of abundant living, not constrained by pride and self, but flying free. Repent to be free from self, free from me, me, me, free from the lust for power, from the certainty that I am right and everyone else is wrong. Free from self-righteousness.

We see the wrong sort of commitment every day of our lives. We see self-righteousness. We see commitment to control, to power. We see commitment to cause hurt and division. Division arises when people who want to retain power exclude others by means of gossip, or anonymous messages, poison pen letters – we hear about these daily. This is what the *News of the World* was so proficient at, and the enormity of which its hacks still deny. This kind of division has been part of human experience since the hissing serpent of the Garden of Eden with its forked, divided tongue. When we divide person from person, or exclude others, we become the devil. Consider the word diabolical: anabolic means building up, catabolic means breaking down, and diabolic means dividing, splintering. The Kingdom of God is about integration, synthesis, anabolism. It is as far removed from diabolical gossip as it is possible to get. These are some of the things that John Baptist calls us to repent about. To acknowledge that we have strayed – sinned in theological jargon – and that we can revise our course by working for togetherness, community and cooperation.

The ship in which we sail the voyage of life, like any ship, does not do well if it is overloaded with lumber. It does best when loaded only with essentials. You might say that to be truly challenging, a voyage must rest on a firm foundation of risk. If we set out on a venture, first of all preparing something to fall back on in case we fail, you can be sure that we will fail. If we risk all and have nothing to fall back on, we are more likely to succeed. The purpose of life is not to be bored, but to lie on our deathbeds and say, 'Ye Gods, that was some ride.' Or words to that effect.

What do we really need? We need food sufficient for the day (give us today ...), we need shelter, somewhere to sleep, and some form of activity that gives a sense of accomplishment. And since it is not good for us to be alone, companionship. That's all. But we are brainwashed by capitalism and the evil (diabolical) advertising industry to let ourselves be trapped by payments, mortgages, fashion, preposterous gadgetry, and storing money in the bank. This is idiocy. As the years pass, our hopes and dreams are corroded by caution and fear. And then we die. *Sin is life unlived*.

When Jesus saw the crowds, we are told, he went away from them. He didn't run after popularity or populism. The worst sin of all is to seek the approval of others. It is tempting for the Rector to do things that others want him to, and to court popularity with the in-crowd. But it is not the way of the Kingdom of God. 'Blessed are those who hunger and search for righteousness': Righteousness is not having fine thoughts and being a goody-goody. Righteousness is about fighting wrongdoing and injustice, about recognizing the inherent dignity and humanity of every person, made in the image of God, and about committing oneself in body, mind and spirit to furthering the goals of that passion. At great personal cost. We will not be popular!

*When John the Baptist preached for all to hear,
He said, 'Repent! The kingdom has come near!'
His rough, prophetic manner caused surprise,
But people heard his words and were baptized.
Prepare the Lord's own way! Make his paths straight!
It's time to change! We can no longer wait!*

*And Lord, you call for change in your church, too,
For even here we've wandered far from you.
Renew in us a vision of your Way,
And give us strength and courage to obey.
Prepare the Lord's own way! Make his paths straight!
It's time to change! We can no longer wait!*

(Carolyn Winfrey Gillette)

That is what John Baptist laid the groundwork for: 'it's time to change.' His vocation is to prepare you and me for judgement, and to call us to repentance. Today's Gospel ends with 'What, then, will this child become?' What will *you* become? What will these churches become? Do we give in to diabolic division, or do we work for anabolic integration? What do we need to do to prepare the way? Here are some suggestions:

- accept each other as we are; don't condemn.
- forgive each other; don't harbour resentments.
- welcome each other; don't exclude.
- care for each other; don't listen to gossip.
- bless each other, especially those we find difficult.

This is the way of the Lord. The gateway is narrow, but the reward is eternal life.