

HOMILIES FROM THE HERMITAGE

CORONA 29: THE BIRTH OF St. JOHN THE BAPTIST

(This will be the penultimate homily from the Hermitage: the series started to give some catechesis for the second part of Lent and Easter to Pentecost. It seemed sensible to include the major feasts thereafter. But as lockdown eases, the hermitage will open. Therefore next weekend (SS Peter and Paul) will be see the last of this group of homilies. A swan song, if you wish, and perhaps over the summer a few cygneture tunes. If there is further lockdown from a spike in the Coronavirus, Advent and Christmas may be back in the hermitage.

JOHN THE BAPTIST; FORERUNNER OF CHRIST

(With the spirit and power of Elijah, he will go before (the Messiah) to turn the fathers towards their children.....preparing for the Lord a people fit for him): Luke 1/17: Gabriel)

(Jesus: Matt 11/13: 'it was towards John that all the prophecies of the prophets and the Law were heading: and he, if you will believe me, is the Elijah who was to return.')

John the Baptist crosses from the Old Testament to the New. He is the last of the Old Testament Prophets and the first of the new, when He proclaims the coming of the Messiah. At his circumcision he was given an unexpected name: John. No-one in his family had been thus named. But the Angel Gabriel said that his name was to be John and with a special message. The name means: 'God is gracious.' and indeed our liturgy brings John to the fore in Advent when he proclaimed the coming of Jesus. But this is John as an adult to welcome the Messiah, Jesus as an adult. John only appears briefly in the chronological Christmas, when He recognizes the Saviour when each was in his respective womb. He is not Father Christmas before the day! In fact John is a somewhat formidable character in the Gospel. An ascetic he lives in the desert, thrilling away on locusts and wild honey. he appears proclaiming a message of repentance and acknowledgement of sins, and giving penitents a form of baptism of repentance. This was to stir up the people and be ready for the imminent arrival of the Messiah. The people were awaiting Elijah to return to bring herald the Messiah, and Jesus says that Elijah is that figure in the person of John, (although John himself denies that he is Elijah!). It is thus that John carried out a way of asceticism and wilderness, as Elijah was in the desert. If John was 'the warm up act' to get people ready for the main act, he was a pretty gloomy and formidable figure. When the Messiah came, John received him and baptized him and thereafter backs off and leads Jesus in the centre. 'He must increase, I must decrease.' John is still an ministry and he stands up to Herod the Fox for his adultery and pays for his courage with his life. He stands out as a rather menacing perhaps even disturbing figure. We tend to wrap him up with our rather sentimental and cuddly Christmas. That is a mistake, but it is a puzzle that John did not at first recognize Jesus as an adult, given that he had recognized Him before even birth. Therefore why celebrate his birthday? We celebrate the birthday of only three people: Jesus, Mary and John the Baptist: most saints celebrate their death and arrival in Heaven. So why do we keep this special celebration? There is an old tradition that John's recognition of Jesus when he not yet born freed him from Original Sin: Jesus and Mary are were likewise free from Original Sin, and thus it appropriate to celebrate John's birth.

(Coda: if wished this can be excluded in editions for publication)

Not everybody agrees with this view of John being thus freed from Original Sin), including some high-ranking clergy, I should be interested to hear any views from any of you in this matter? Meanwhile enjoy the Feast exactly halfway through the year before Christmas!