

**REJOICE –  
THE LORD IS  
NEAR!**

(JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28)



*Statue of St John the Baptist on the north side of Charles Bridge, one of the most famous tourist spots in Prague*

**John the Baptist is, in some ways, a transitional figure: he straddles what we usually call the Old and New Testaments, by which we mean the Jewish and Christian scriptures.**

He looks backward to the prophets of the Jewish tradition, especially to Elijah, the figure who represents the prophetic tradition. On the other hand, he looks forward to the coming of the Christ and functions as his herald, announcing the near arrival of the kingdom of God.

In today's Gospel episode, we hear how John was a puzzle to those who shared his Jewish faith: was he, in fact, the Messiah? There seem to have been more than a few people who thought that he might well be. The leaders of the people send representatives to ask John to clarify his position, and he states firmly that he is not the Christ, whose sandal-strap he is not worthy to undo.

The New Testament writers clearly had a difficulty with the figure of John the Baptist and his relationship to Jesus. John was obviously a significant person at the time and so has a place in the Gospel tradition. The reading from the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, the first paragraph of our extract today, presents him as being sent by God – as a witness. No matter how important John was in his own right, his place in the tradition is as a subordinate to Jesus, and once Jesus appears, John's role comes to an end. We might remember that the most important person in the Gospel tradition is Jesus: all other characters, no matter how significant, are always presented in relation to Jesus and never in isolation, separated from him. ■

## LEARN

In the Fourth Gospel, the term "the Jews" normally refers to the Jewish leaders who are hostile to Jesus.

In the Gospel according to John, "to believe" is to make a positive decision for Jesus and his teaching.

Priests and Levites are figures principally associated with the Temple in Jerusalem.

## REFLECT

Someone once remarked that there is no occurrence of the word "faith" in the Gospel according to John. This statement is, strictly speaking, true. The noun "faith" is not found, but the verb "to believe" occurs well over 100 times. Faith, in this sense, is not something that we possess but rather something we do. The Creed which we declare together at the Eucharist is a statement of doctrine, but faith is essentially a relationship with God. The evangelist John tells us throughout his Gospel version that to believe is to make a choice: it is not a matter of logic, but rather a personal decision to accept Jesus and his teaching.

As we approach the celebration of the birth of Christ, we might reflect on this aspect of our Christian life. Sometimes cradle Catholics say that they envy people who come to the faith later in life, because they have had to make a conscious, adult decision for themselves in a way that others, born into Catholic families and raised in a Christian environment, never had to. At Christmas, we celebrate the coming of the light into the world. It is our choice whether we live in the light or not. We might make this Christmas an opportunity to renew that resolution once more. ■

## SAY

**Rejoice in the Lord always!  
(Philippians 4:4)**

## DO

Look at the state of the roads around your town: how does their condition reflect your readiness to welcome Jesus at Christmas?



**ENTRANCE ANTIPHON**

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.  
Indeed, the Lord is near.

**COLLECT**

O God, who see how your people faithfully await the feast of the Lord's Nativity, enable us we pray, to attain the joys of so great a salvation and to celebrate them always with solemn worship and glad rejoicing. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.  
**Amen.**

**FIRST READING** Isaiah 61: 1-2, 10-11

A reading from the prophet Isaiah.  
The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for the Lord has anointed me.  
He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,  
to bind up hearts that are broken;  
to proclaim liberty to captives,  
freedom to those in prison;  
to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.  
"I exult for joy in the Lord,  
my soul rejoices in my God,  
for he has clothed me in garments of salvation,  
he has wrapped me in the cloak of integrity,  
like a bridegroom wearing his wreath,  
like a bride adorned in her jewels.  
For as the earth makes fresh things grow,  
as a garden makes seeds spring up,  
so will the Lord make both integrity and praise  
spring up in the sight of the nations."  
The word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

**PSALM** Luke 1

Response:  
**My soul rejoices in my God.**

1. My soul glorifies the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour.  
He looks on his servant in her nothingness;  
henceforth all ages will call me blessed. (R.)
2. The Almighty works marvels for me.  
Holy his name!  
His mercy is from age to age,  
on those who fear him. (R.)
3. He fills the starving with good things,  
sends the rich away empty.  
He protects Israel, his servant,  
remembering his mercy. (R.)

**SECOND READING** 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians.  
Be happy at all times; pray constantly; and for all things give thanks to God, because this is what God expects you to do in Christ Jesus.  
Never try to suppress the Spirit or treat the gift of prophecy with contempt; think before you do anything – hold on to what is good and avoid every form of evil.

May the God of peace make you perfect and holy; and may you all be kept safe and blameless, spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has called you and he will not fail you.  
The word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

**GOSPEL ACCLAMATION**

**Alleluia, alleluia!**  
The spirit of the Lord has been given to me.  
He has sent me to bring good news to the poor.  
**Alleluia!**

**GOSPEL** John 1:6-8, 19-28

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John.  
A man came, sent by God.  
His name was John.  
He came as a witness,  
as a witness to speak for the light,  
so that everyone might believe through him.  
He was not the light,  
only a witness to speak for the light.  
This is how John appeared as a witness.  
When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" he not only declared, but he declared quite openly, "I am not the Christ." "Well then," they asked "are you Elijah?" "I am not" he said. "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We must take back an answer to those who sent us. What have you to say about yourself?" So John said, "I am, as Isaiah prophesied:  
a voice that cries in the wilderness:  
Make a straight way for the Lord."

Now these men had been sent by the Pharisees, and they put this further question to him, "Why are you baptising if you are not the Christ, and not Elijah, and not the prophet?" John replied, "I baptise with water; but there stands among you – unknown to you – the one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo his sandal-strap." This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

The Gospel of the Lord.  
**Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

**PROFESSION OF FAITH**

**I believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.**  
**I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Only Begotten Son of God,  
born of the Father before all ages.  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made, consubstantial with  
the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us men and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
(all bow during the next three lines)  
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the  
Virgin Mary,  
and became man.**  
**For our sake he was crucified under  
Pontius Pilate,  
he suffered death and was buried,  
and rose again on the third day**

**in accordance with the Scriptures.  
He ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead  
and his kingdom will have no end.**  
**I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,  
the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is adored  
and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.**  
**I believe in one, holy, catholic and  
apostolic Church.**  
**I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness  
of sins  
and I look forward to the resurrection of the  
dead  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

**PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS**

May the sacrifice of our worship, Lord, we pray,  
be offered to you unceasingly,  
to complete what has begun in sacred mystery  
and powerfully accomplish for us your saving  
work.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

**COMMUNION ANTIPHON**

**Say to the faint of heart: Be strong and do  
not fear.**  
**Behold, our God will come, and he will save  
us.**

**PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION**

We implore your mercy, Lord,  
that this divine sustenance may cleanse us of  
our faults  
and prepare us for the coming feasts.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

The pilgrims continue to come. Only God knows what each one of us brings, and with what kind of heart. We come mystically to this cave. We know the mess we bring and the often distracted heart that brings it. But this is all we have – all we are. One stretches out his arms to receive.

*Basil M Pennington OCSO*

