

The Nativity of John the Baptist
(Isaiah 49:1-6 / Luke 1:57-66,80)
24.06.2019

The Scripture passages read this morning would have us think of how the love of God has preceded us throughout our lives.

God's love was there for us from the moment of our conception. It was there for us during the time we were carried in our mother's womb. God's love remains with us until this day, just as it will until the end of our days. God's love is with us at this very moment.

Is it not marvellous to think that we were, all of us, loved into being by our Creator God? The Lord shared His breath of life with us just as the Creation Story tells us He did with Adam. God's love which remains with us sustains us in being with every breath we breathe. God's love for us will never cease – even if and when we forget and/or ignore His presence in our lives.

God's love for us is a love which all so often finds expression in other people's love for us.

The sense of awe which was awoken in the people who looked on at the time of John the Baptist's birth and who treasured in their hearts the wonder of God's love which brought this child into being, witnessing as they did the joy of his loving parents Zechariah and Elizabeth, should be ours before the mystery of every human life – including our own.

The way we look at others should reflect God's loving regard which is placed upon each human being.

Every person is and we are, all of us, loved and desired by God from the womb to the tomb. The psalmist sings of the marvel we are and the immensity of the love of our Creator God for us when he proclaims: *Too glorious, too wonderful to believe the splendour of my being. You made all the delicate inner parts of my being, knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! It is amazing to think about! Your workmanship is marvellous – and how well I know it. You were there when I was being formed in seclusion, hidden from the view of others. You saw me before I was born. You scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe! All things concerning me, my every day, are written in Your book, inscribed upon Your heart. How precious it is to realise that You are thinking about me constantly!*

I invite you to think of the Lord's care for you. I encourage you to recall the Lord's consideration for you at the time when you were being carried in your mother's womb. I invite you to remember that all His attention is with you today.

Do we ever think of these things sufficiently?

I know the awareness of the prayer my late mother prayed during the months of her pregnancy with me at the shrine of Mary, Mother of Perpetual Help, is a thought that is awakened in my own heart every so often and, when I consider it, I find it a source of comfort, consolation and strength – not least at those moments when difficulties are part of my present life experience.

The thought of my late mother's prayer for me as she carried me in her womb comes to me at this period each year when so many people make their way for the Annual Novena to pray at the same shrine at which my late mother prayed for me – and all her family: that of the Redemptorist Fathers' church in Belfast, at Clonard.

Like me, many of you will have moments in which you are led to recall a prayer which came out of another's (and hopefully several others') loving heart in your regard and which has given you strength throughout the years.

The verses from psalm 139 I quoted a moment ago reveal an exciting fact concerning each and every one of us – whoever and whatever we are, whoever or whatever we might consider ourselves to be or aspire to being, while, admittedly, always falling somewhat short of our own ideals. They assure us that no matter how average or below average we might think our lives are and our response to God's call is, we were and always will be *wonderfully made!*

I suppose we are led to think of the psalmist's words in psalm 139 every so often – in a moment of prayer during a retreat, for example, or in some other similar setting – but I suspect few of us marvel at the wonder of our being all the time. More is the pity. If only we did, then we would feel stronger within; we would feel better about ourselves, more equipped and up for the spiritual combat which is part of our human experience.

It is so important for us to remember that God's thought for us did not cease when we came forth from the womb. The Lord is thinking about us at all times. He holds a thought for us in His heart at this very moment. If only we truly believed that then what is a terrible ill – a real plight in so many of our lives – would be healed. I am thinking of the ill of low self-esteem which so often leads to a lack of proper self-respect.

A lack of proper self-respect can propel us into self-destructive thought patterns and damaging behaviours of various kinds; it can lead us into dependencies, addictions, negativities of all sorts. The power of our dependencies is often rooted in low self-esteem and our forgetfulness that we are – each one of us – as the psalmist puts it, *an amazing creature!* The challenge for us is to see ourselves in this way. We were *wonderfully made*, the psalmist exclaims. We are *an exquisite piece of God's own handicraft*.

Given what I have just said, how then can we explain what happened to us along the way and has brought us to where we are today? What explains how broken we have become? For, let's face it, none of us has it *perfectly together* at this moment in our lives. Not one of us has come through life totally unscathed.

The reality is that we live in a broken world. So many voices are heard all around us and, in their turn, those same voices resonate within us, contradicting God's creative word of love.

I suspect that few, if any, of us really ever take the time to wonder at the marvel of our being in a constantly sustained way. If only we could hear the incessant echo of that message whispered into our hearts by the God who made us: *I love you. I esteem you. You are my beloved. Be loved.*

Instead of those words of truth we pay heed to the lies promulgated by the Evil One who from the very outset of the story of humanity has contradicted God's life-giving and life-affirming message to those whom He loved into being.

The one who divides us within ourselves and seeks to pull our lives apart insinuates to us that we are *not up to the mark* – and never will be; that we are no good... certainly not as good as we should be; that our lives have little worth... and maybe sometimes, in the extreme, are totally worthless. The voice of the Evil One convinces us that we are *just a mess*. These thoughts can leave us feeling ready to be discarded by God and by others. The lies of the Great Deceiver can lead us to abandon ourselves and thereby become alienated from our deepest and truest self.

What harm we do to ourselves when we allow our inner darkness to speak to us and engulf our lives and destroy our well-being!

Even when we make an effort to blot out the messages which seek to destabilise us, we never manage to dim them out completely. They might not sound like a siren, but they can resonate within us by their quiet insinuating whisper. Even though the voice is not loud, the doubt it manages to sow in our hearts can be enough to threaten our peace, if not take it away entirely. The real drama of so many people's lives – our own real drama, all too often – is the time spent listening to voices which are in contradiction with that of God. We can become obsessed with the negative words of others and give more credence to those who speak ill of us than we give to the Lord who speaks well over us because of the good He sees within us – even if and when this goodness lies under layers which hide it from others and even from ourselves.

How many of us spend our time and energy trying to be what someone else wants us to be because we feel we are not good enough. This can lead us to do all we can to separate from our inner being because we are so deeply ashamed of who we are. Self-hatred – certainly a lack of proper self-love – is a defect of character that we need to let go of. It breeds all kinds of other ills: bitterness, exaggerated feelings of having been short-changed and badly done by... and this then leads on to covetousness of others, jealousy in their regard, the longing to be in someone else's situation and have what they have.

One very important step in our coming to know peace of mind and heart and the sense of well-being that stems from this inner state is to allow God to remove all self-hatred, all lack of love for our self. It is to ask Him to help us value ourselves for who we are.

I am sure that John the Baptist heard the story of his birth from both from his parents and from others close to him. This will have confirmed for him his God-given vocation and sustained him in his response to the Lord's call in his life, especially at those moments when times were tough and the going was hard.

That being said, I do not doubt that John will have sometimes questioned himself – and even given way to uncertainty in regard to his calling. There were times in the Baptist's life when he wondered if he had not gotten it all wrong. The gospels lead us to believe that this combat was his even as his life neared its end. Think of that message he sent from his prison cell when he asked his disciples to go and inquire from Jesus about His identity. John's disciples were to ask Jesus if He really was the promised Messiah, the One who was to come, or should another be awaited. John's whole mission and life focus had been on the One who was to come. In the course of his ministry, he had recognised Jesus as the One sent by God; he had acknowledged Him to be the Christ and pointed others in His direction... and yet, at the end of the day, he was left wondering if he may have gotten it all wrong.

The same sort of questioning – rooted in recurrent self-doubt and uncertainty – can arise in our hearts at times. This will happen especially at our low-ebb moments, at those times when we find ourselves plunged into darkness – as John was in his prison cell.

John's humble questioning did not win him Jesus' disfavour. To the contrary. Jesus sought to reassure the Baptist. He said to John's disciples: *Go and tell John what you have seen. In other words: Go and reassure John that he did get it right – even though he is where he is. Tell him that although he is in prison, falsely accused and rejected, he did get it right.*

What Jesus wanted John to know was not only that He (Jesus) was the Messiah, the Christ of God, but that he John had properly fulfilled his mission.

We are told in the Scriptures that John was *the greatest man to be born after Christ*. In God's eyes John was great... and so are we. You will recall a follow-up Scriptural assurance: *Yet, even the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist.*

Let me draw to a closure by quoting the words of another psalm, marrying its sentiments with those of psalm 139 – challenging you, as I challenge myself, to be able to pray these words for ourselves. In psalm 8 we read: *Why do you bother with us? Why take a second look our way? We are but puny folk. And yet, You have put us in charge of everything You made. We have so narrowly missed being gods, bright with Eden's dawn light. You have made us just a little less than You Yourself are!*

Returning to psalm 139 we can exclaim: *How precious it is, Lord, to realise that You are thinking about me constantly! I cannot even count how many times a day Your thoughts turn toward me. When I waken each morning, you are there thinking of me, even as You have kept watch over me during the night!*

In a world wherein life is so degraded by many – and increasingly discarded by some – how important for us to proclaim the preciousness of life, its awesome sanctity. Let us seek to protect life from the womb to the tomb. Let us proclaim the preciousness of our own life and its awesome sanctity by glorifying God by the manner in which we live.