

"What's in a Name?"

The Birth of John the Baptist

Isaiah 49:1-6
Psalms 139:1b-3, 13-14ab, 14c-15 (14)

Acts of the Apostles 13:22-26
Luke 1:57-66, 80

With the recent birth of the third child of Prince William of Wales and his wife Catherine, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, came a great deal of speculation as to what name they would choose. At the birth of their first born there was even greater expectation that the name chosen would speak to the traditions and institutions of English history, particularly of the monarchy, as the child, along with his father, (the future William V) and grandfather (the future Charles III) are in direct succession to the British Crown, following Queen Elizabeth II. With the name, George, the young prince will become the Seventh of that name to sit on the Throne of England, the continuation of a dynasty of Hanoverian monarchs, who eventually took the more British name of Windsor during World War I. Truly the name of the future George VII speaks to the history of the current ruling dynasty, as well as the historical Act of Succession that only a Protestant should sit on the English throne.

Eight days after the Birth of John the Baptist the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth was formally named. His father had been struck mute in the wake of his skepticism of Gabriel's announcement, only to be released

upon his written declaration of the child's name. In his first words after the naming, Zechariah uttered a prophecy that spoke to the child's role in God's fulfillment of the promises made in the prophetic tradition of Israel. Indeed, in the very event of the child's birth we are reminded that God



fulfills His promises and that His divine and single-minded purpose throughout a tumultuous history with His chosen people has been redemption, salvation and freedom; all encompassed in the name that expresses in its meaning the simple truth that "God is gracious": "His name is JOHN."

The name "John" also ushers in something new in the history of salvation. While the Baptist is most probably not the first person ever to be so named, the name "John" appears nowhere in the Old Testament. Yet it is the name, not only of the Baptist, but of one of the Twelve, traditionally associated with "the Beloved Disciple". It is the name attributed to the fourth Gospel, to the author of three New Testament Epistles as well the Seer who receives visions recounted in the Book of Revelation. "John" is the name of no less than sixty-eight saints (more if we include five named "Joan" and two named "Juan"),

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and twenty-three popes (plus three anti-popes). The consistent popularity of the name "John" has been a persistent reminder within the context of Christian faith, society and culture, that at the heart of salvation history, "God is gracious".

As with the Birth of John the Baptist, we encounter moments within our own journey of faith in which we are given or take on a name. Our name is the first gift given to us by our parents, which is formally declared at our Baptism. At Confirmation we take on a new name, or apply our given name to a saint who serves for us as a model of holiness. When a man or woman enters

the religious life, they take on a name as part of their profession. More than anything from which we draw an identity, our name is the most fundamental. From our birth to our death our name speaks to our family origins and the hopes for our future destiny. As people of faith, our name and its meaning can serve to orient us in our relationship with God, as we seek to discern more fully how our lives are called to reflect His greatness.

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