

## **Nativity of St. John the Baptist - "A Christ-Centred Feast"**

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Every Saturday night to Sunday at Vespers, the Orthodox Church honours the great feast of the Resurrection of Christ. All our Sundays are dedicated - consecrated - to celebrate the "feast of feasts", a way that the Church points to the Centre of our faith: Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. It is only fitting, then, that we also celebrate on Sunday this year the nativity - or birth - of "the greatest of the prophets", the Saint who pointed to Jesus for the universe to see Him as the Son of God, the Saviour of the world. That is why this feast could be seen (just like all other feasts) as a Christ-centred feast - even though the Lord was born in the flesh months after the birth of this biblical figure.

From the time when he was in his mother's womb, St. John the Forerunner and Baptist showed people the Truth. As the Virgin Mary approached his mother Elizabeth (when both of them were pregnant), St. John leapt in his mother's womb, proclaiming the Messiah was to be born, and not merely another man. Through his conception and time in his mother's womb, the world was introduced to the Virgin Mary, the mother of the Saviour of the world.

At first, St. Zechariah (a priest of the temple) was sceptical of the miracle of his son's conception told to him by the Archangel Gabriel. For this, the Archangel showed him God's power: Zechariah was not able to speak until his son was born and was to be given a name on the eighth day. When he wrote his son's name to be "John", the evangelist tells us that Zechariah was able to speak again. As Christians, we should recognize this miracle not as God punishing Zechariah for his scepticism, but saving him from committing a greater sin - the sin of apostasy, the sin of unbelief. Through St. John the Baptist's birth, Zechariah came to love God in a whole new way - not to mention that he came to understand fully what both St. John's and Christ's birth meant - that God is a God of wonders, He is the Centre of our lives, and we are His people who are called to praise and worship Him with all our hearts. He says it himself: "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people. To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, The oath which He swore to our father Abraham"

To his son, he said, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins. To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace."

The call of his father was, indeed, followed by his son. St. John stayed true to his calling throughout his life. Although there is no doubt that St. John had the chance to bask in the "glory" people gave him (with people declaring him "the Messiah"), he loved God more than glory (not to mention falsehood). He answered them, saying: "I am not the Christ.. I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the path of the Lord'.." (John 1:20, 23)

The humility of St. John the Baptist - just as the humility of all the Saints - shows us that there is One to whom is due all glory, honour and worship: the Holy Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When Jesus finally appeared to him at the Jordan, St. John the Baptist pointed and said to the people without reservation: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29b)

In the final analysis, St. John's ministry by the Jordan River wasn't one to merely give people a "get out of jail free" card and say to them some "nice words" - empty promises are worthless. St. John's ministry (indeed, his whole life) would lead hundreds of people to hear the word of Jesus Christ in those days and allow them to make that decision: do I want to be with Christ or not?

Through their lives (and, for some, their martyrdom), all of the Church's Saints give us the same message. They are all pointing to Christ to redeem us from our sins. They are not the ones who save us. They are not the ones who do the miracles. God is the One who will save us. He is the one who displays "miraculous signs and wonders". The Saints pray for us, intercede on our behalf. We ask for their prayers because they are closer to the Throne of God than us. While we are still on the journey to the Kingdom, they have reached the destination.

Brothers and sisters: The Orthodox Church is a Christ-centred Church. Everything we do - sermons, iconography, chants, philanthropy, or helping serve the Church and our neighbour- should be Christ-centred. If we live our lives like St. John and the Saints, we Christians do all these things because we love God and follow the words of the Bible: "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal. 2:20)

As we praise God for His wonders, glorifying the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead on this Sunday morning, may we all ask St. John the Baptist for his prayers, so that we may be like him: Christ-centred, every single day of our lives.

*St. John the Forerunner and Baptist, pray for us to the merciful God.*