

Serving Others in God's Love: Religious Freedom Week 2018

Homily Helps for Sunday, June 24, 2018

The Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist

Readings:

First Reading – Isaiah 49:1-6

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 139:1B-3, 13-14AB, 14C-15

Second Reading – Acts 13:22-26

Gospel – Luke 1:57-66, 80

The ministry of John the Baptist:

- As herald of the Christ, John the Baptist reveals what it means to be a witness. He was one of the greatest of the prophets, and his courageous truth-telling led to his martyrdom.
- He preaches a message of repentance, challenging complacency among the people of Israel. He is often thought of as the last of the old prophets. When he is approached by religious leaders who are failing in their role, he confronts them directly, calling them a brood of vipers. He also challenges the immorality of the political leaders, opposing Herod's marriage – a stance for which he was later beheaded.
- By calling people to come to be dipped in the waters of the Jordan as an act of repentance, he reminds his fellow Judeans of the Exodus. The call to renewal is an act of remembrance. The action says, “Remember the God who delivered you!” At the same time, the ritual looks forward to the one who has been promised to bring true freedom to Israel.
- John’s renewal movement prepared the way of Jesus. John knew that God was moving in his people, even if he did not know what that would mean. When Jesus comes to be baptized, an act of his solidarity with sinners, John first begins to recognize Jesus as the one to come. Later in Jesus’ ministry, John says to his own disciples, “He must increase; I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). He bears witness to the freedom that comes with true humility and openness to answering a call.

The call to share the joy of the Gospel with others:

- “From [his] mother’s womb” Isaiah had a transcendent calling: to gather back to God his scattered people. This is one of the main missions of the Church as well: to gather all the nations into the peace of God’s kingdom. We do not belong to the politics of division, but to the one House of God.
- Isaiah says that it is not enough to be a people of maintenance, who do only the minimum that is required of us and preach “to the choir” alone. Rather, God says through Isaiah that we must look beyond ourselves, becoming light to everyone, to all the nations, in order that salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. The mission of the Church reaches beyond the boundaries of the church building. We are called to be missionary disciples who serve others in God’s love.

- All baptized Christians are called to share the joy of the gospel with others. When most of our co-workers, neighbors, and even family members don't share our faith and perhaps do not practice any faith at all, we might be timid or afraid to talk about our faith. But in a culture filled with so much junk, people are hungry for solid food. When we encounter Jesus Christ, we come to know the bread of life, the truth in which the restless hearts of our age can rest. We love our neighbors by helping them to encounter Jesus.

Freedom and obedience:

- Religious freedom is necessarily yoked to obedience to the Word of God. Without God's Word as our touchstone, freedom can devolve into a misguided pursuit of our own agendas and ambitions under the guise of piety. For any freedom to avoid becoming the slavery of license, it needs to be in obedient service to the truth.
- Obedience to the angel's command, "John is his name" is what gives Zechariah true freedom. John the Baptist himself became great with the "hand of the Lord" upon him precisely because he learned this lesson of humble obedience from his parents. Sometimes we seek a false freedom on our own terms, without discerning how the Lord desires us to use our freedom.
- During Religious Freedom Week, we should be mindful that, while it is important to stand up for the civil right to be free from government coercion, our freedom comes from Christ, and so we are always free when we remain in Christ. When a government attempts to force us to violate our consciences, we must witness to the truth. A state that coerces the conscience of its citizens radically oversteps its proper boundaries. Rather than resist as a revolutionary, the Christian bears patient witness to the truth, even if that witness leads to punishment. John the Baptist shows that service to the truth may entail martyrdom, but he finds true freedom in his faithful witness.