

Homily: Second Sunday of Easter, 19th April 2020

When I was a seminarian at Ushaw, one day a slightly cryptic note went up on the college noticeboard, telling us that certain restrictions would be in place the following day because the college was being visited by a “senior government minister”. Naturally we were curious to know who it was, and over the following hours more information about the visit came out. By the following morning we knew that the Prime Minister – at that time, Tony Blair – was going to be at Ushaw, and, as you can imagine, the visit caused a bit of a stir. Early in the morning the police turned up with sniffer dogs and various bits of equipment, searching the parts of the building he would visit, turning the sofas upside down in the student common room and finding lots of coins that had gone down the back of them. Those of us who were fortunate not to have classes that morning decided to go outside and wait for him to arrive. There were various bits of activity, people coming and going, as the morning went on. Finally, we could see on the road leading up to the college a police motorbike, lights flashing, heading towards the college drive, and at that stage we knew the visit was imminent.

Now, I’m not comparing Our Lord with Tony Blair, but there is something similar in the history of God’s revelation. Just as a note, rumours, activity on site and the arrival of the police alerted us that the Prime Minister was visiting our college, so God alerted His people to the coming of the Saviour. Prophets announced Him by their words and actions, a sense of expectation and anticipation built up over the centuries, those who read the Scriptures knew that He was coming; finally, God sent the forerunner of the Lord, the precursor, St John the Baptist, to announce the imminent arrival of the Messiah. It’s as though the police outriders have finally come into view, and we know the Saviour is near.

This is precisely why the Church celebrates the birth of St John the Baptist, and does so with a major feast day. His birth is a clear signal: the Lord is near; salvation is dawning in our world. Even before His birth John had been filled with the Holy Spirit and had leapt for joy when he sensed the closeness of the unborn Lord Jesus. Now that John is born, God’s plan of salvation is made more visible. When the angel Gabriel appeared to John’s father, Zechariah, and told him that his wife would conceive despite her old age, Gabriel foretold that many would rejoice at John’s birth (Luke 1:14). Today we see that promise fulfilled: friends and neighbours share Elizabeth’s joy at the birth of her son, and all those throughout Judea who hear the news treasure it in their hearts. We, too, are invited to share in this joy today: we are part of the fulfilment of the angel’s promise, rejoicing today in the gift of St John the Baptist, the last great prophet who comes to announce the closeness of the Lord.

Today his parents see John’s face for the first time, but they also hear his voice. Every new-born baby cries. For the first time the sound of the voice which will announce the arrival of the Saviour is heard. John, the voice which will cry in the wilderness, makes his first sound. Later this same voice will announce the Word Himself, Jesus, the Word made flesh for our salvation. And this birth is accompanied by a miracle: John’s father Zechariah, unable to speak since he saw the angel, now recovers his voice; he speaks and praises God. Zechariah

finds a voice to praise the Lord for His wonders, and the world finds a voice which will announce the greatest wonder of all.

John is often called the 'precursor' or the 'forerunner' of the Lord. It's striking how well he fulfils this role, doing so many of the things that the Lord Himself will do: his birth is announced by the Angel Gabriel; his conception is miraculous; he goes ahead of the Lord in his birth, which is accompanied by signs and wonders; the Gospel today tells us that John goes out into the desert, just as Jesus did; later he will proclaim repentance, he will baptise and will gather disciples; finally, he will shed his blood, being put to death by the corrupt authorities, and he will be buried by his disciples. In birth, life and death John goes ahead of Jesus to prepare His ways before Him. But there it must stop: there is no record of John working a miracle, and he certainly did not rise from the tomb. There are some things that only the Saviour, God Himself, may do.

There are limits to our abilities, too, but – like John – we are called to prepare the hearts of others to receive the Lord Jesus. We cannot give people faith, but, by the way we live and speak, we can help to open the eyes of our families, friends, neighbours, colleagues; we can help to prepare their hearts so that they can receive a visit from the Lord. The Lord will come to those He chooses, but He will be much better received if their hearts are prepared for His visit. God prepared our world for the Saviour through the work of the prophets and, finally, through the ministry of St John the Baptist. He continues to prepare our world for His presence today, but now it is through the lives of His disciples – in other words, us.

A couple of days ago it was the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. The hours of daylight are beginning to diminish again. Six months from now, when we celebrate the Lord's birth, the days will be starting to lengthen again. It's as though the liturgy and creation combine to express something that St John the Baptist said about Jesus: "He must increase, and I must decrease". The daylight begins to decrease as John is born; it begins to increase at the Lord's birth. John's words are a programme for our whole lives: within each of us, Jesus must increase and we – our own wills, our own selfishness – must decrease. Today we share the joy that the forerunner of the Lord is born. Let us allow this joy to inspire us to follow his example, allowing the Lord to increase in us and joyfully announcing His closeness to others.

Fr Andrew

