

Homily062418

HE MUST INCREASE; I MUST DECREASE

Why does the Church celebrate the birth of John the Baptist? The only other birthdays that are celebrated are those of Jesus and his Mother, Mary. And John the Baptist. And why is it celebrated on the 24th of June? This past week, on June 21 summer officially began. The summer solstice took place and the day of the most daylight happened. Ironically on the first day of summer is the day when there is the most daylight. Tomorrow there will be slightly less daylight and the day after that too until we reach the fall, the autumnal equinox when there is more or less an equal amount of daylight and nighttime. And then on to the winter solstice on December 21st when there is the least amount of daylight. And ironically again, from the winter solstice there begins to be slightly more daylight each day and slightly less darkness.

Astronomers and the planners of calendars have known these things for millennia. The Church has known too. And in the liturgical year the Church sometimes situates feasts in terms of the physical calendar of events. You will remember that John the Baptist, when he points Jesus out as the Lamb of God says, "He must increase; I must decrease." With John it was never really about him. It was always about Jesus. John was the herald of the One to come. John was the one who was to point out to the world the Holy One of God. John was to smooth out the paths, making the mountains collapse and the valleys be filled in and the rough way made smooth. He was the Voice proclaiming the Lamb of God.

What does that really mean? I mean, we say it at every Mass, "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world have mercy on us." Lamb? Of God? Why lamb? Because of the Passover lamb. That lamb was slain on that last night 1200 years before Christ when the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt. They were to take a lamb, slay it, pour out its blood and anoint the doorposts and lintels of their homes. Then the Author of Life's angel of death would pass over in Egypt taking the lives of all firstborn children in every home but not those whose homes were adorned with the blood of those lambs. The people of Israel were to be saved by the blood of the lamb.

Fast forward 1200 years. John points to Jesus and calls him THE Lamb of God. His meaning? All the other lambs were slain so that the Israelites would be saved by their blood. But in this moment God has acted definitively and sent his only begotten Son, his Beloved, to take on our flesh and live our life. And to sacrifice himself on our behalf, saving us from sins and the death that comes to us because of our sins. So, Jesus is the Lamb of God. And in effect John the Baptist sums up and completes the whole Old Testament. He is the last Old Testament prophet. He is the last Old Testament martyr. He will be killed by King Herod whose father tried to kill Jesus as an infant. John will not live to see the triumph of Jesus on the cross and his glorious resurrection. John will salute them from afar as he goes his way.

So the Church celebrates John's feast right at the summer solstice because his light is beginning to ebb. Things will become darker until Jesus bursts on the scene and teaches God's truth, performs mighty deeds, show care and love for the needy and speaks truth to power. The Church celebrates Jesus' birth right around the darkest day of the year

because from that moment on there will be ever more light because Jesus IS the Light of the World.

Moses wandered in the desert for forty years until it was time to enter the Promised Land. He dies before he and the Israelites enter. Moses salutes from afar. The Israelites were then led into the Promised Land by Joshua, Yohshua. Same root word. Yeshua, Jesus. Joshua parts the Jordan River and leads the Israelites into their new home. John the Baptist dies before Jesus enters into the Promised Land and leads the Israelites out of the slavery of sin and into the kingdom of heaven, the new and eternal Promised Land. The baptism of John in the same Jordan River introduces the Israelites to repentance and forgiveness. Jesus brings to the water of baptism the gift of the Holy Spirit of God. And thus your baptism and mine is a baptism in water and the Holy Spirit.

Why do I go into all this? To shore up your faith. To remind you that you have the Spirit of the Living God indwelling your soul. That is true whether you remember it or not, whether you think of it or not. But it is so much better when we realize what is going on and we live and make decisions in the light of that truth. So here is a final thought. The waters of baptism. Are they one and done? Received once and then no more? Or can we experience the refreshing and cleansing and life-giving waters yet another time? We can. BUT not by being baptized again. We experiencing the cleansing waters and the new life of baptism in the sacrament of Reconciliation. The Lord washes us clean of our sin. It is like we are dipped anew in the refreshing and life-giving waters of our baptism. And it's free, available and truly transforming. Maybe we need to start thinking of the sacrament of reconciliation in a new way. Want to be truly washed clean and restored to original innocence? Make a good confession.