

Our Lady of Dallas
Saturday, June 24, 2012
Feast of John the Baptist
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In the gospel from St. Luke, those gathered with Elizabeth and Zachariah for the presentation of John the Baptist, witness some of the marvels associated with this particular baby, still a mere eight days old, and we are told that they marvel about him in their hearts, asking, “What, then, will this child be?”

In reading this passage, I was reminded of a personal episode several years back with my then middle school students at our Cistercian Preparatory School. It was during one of those long Friday afternoon study halls. While always a chore for the kids to stay on task during a study hall, it is all the more so, as you might imagine, on a *Friday* afternoon, last period. In any case, during this particular study hall the young boys (I believe they were in the 6th or 7th grade) instead of knocking out their homework or reading ahead they began to discuss and speculate among themselves what each would become when he grew up, concluding, for example, that so and so would most certainly become an astronaut, so and so, of course, a professional athlete, so and so a priest, etc., etc. Well, I was preoccupied grading papers all the while, trying to get finished before the weekend, though admittedly listening with some interest and a bit of amusement at their prognostications.

Then, unexpectedly, at a certain point in the conversation, the little fellow on the front row (Bill was his name) looked up at me sitting right before him at the teacher’s desk and asked, “Fr. Paul, what do *you* think *I* will be when I grow up?” Well, intent on finishing my papers, I was poised to respond with some funny/lighthearted little zinger of a comment (something about being a garbage man or a street sweeper or jail bird or the like) immediately followed by the admonition to get back to studying!!! But when I looked up saw the seriousness in the expression on his face and the earnestness with which he was obviously awaiting my response, I was caught a little off guard, realizing that at his age what I say may actually matter to the boy. And so, after a thoughtful pause, I looked him in the eye and said: “Bill, in all honesty, even if I had a pretty good hunch what you would be, I would not tell you. I would be afraid that in some way I

would be limiting *your* imagination and dreams by imposing on you those of my own. Undoubtedly, God's plan for *you* is far beyond even the best that I might hope or imagine." This young man was so amazingly bright, musically and linguistically gifted, and possessing so very many talents and abilities, there is simply no telling what God might have in store for him to one day do or accomplish. But, *whatever* he eventually would *do* there was *even more importantly* no doubt in my mind about what God wanted him to *be*. And then looking around the classroom, seeing that without *in*ention I now had the *at*ention of the whole class, I realized then that this was a message I needed as a teacher and Form Master to be more conscious of re-enforcing for each one of them, again and again – particularly in the years that would follow, those often difficult and confusing years of adolescence. Namely, that it is not knowing what we will do, but knowing who we are that matters most. And, indeed, a proper sense ultimately of who we are (sons and daughters of God, admittedly weakened by concupiscence, but sons and daughters of God none the less) comes to us from our Christian faith. It is a self-awareness that when embraced cannot help but to shape and even to determine all that we do and will one day accomplish.

In the Church calendar, there are actually two feasts of John the Baptist, the Nativity or birth which we celebrate this Sunday and then that of his martyrdom/ beheading a little later in the summer, August 29. Whereas the primary focus of the latter feast is the grace of God active in the ministry of the Baptizer as the preeminent forerunner of Christ, I believe the remembrance today that of his nativity is a call to celebrate God's grace in John's parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, as well. For they, along with Mary and Joseph, undoubtedly had much to do with who their son would ultimately become. And, in this regard, they serve as excellent role models for parents and for all who bear some responsibility in helping to raise, form, and educate God's children. And so again, in preparing for today's celebration of John's Nativity, my reflections centered upon that question asked in the Gospel: "What, then will this child be?" and upon how Zachariah and Elizabeth's stubborn persistence that his name be "John" manifests in some way just how clearly (despite the terrible hardship it would entail) they not only knew, but also accepted the answer.

One could easily imagine, for example, the temptation Zachariah *must* have had to do that which all successful, proud and accomplished fathers in that day (and for that matter in *any* day) would do, to name the child after himself and to raise him with all the benefits that his social status as high-priest could afford. But Zachariah resisted. He remained true to his word to name the child not after himself, but John, according to God's command/will. And in so doing he re-affirms that as much as this child is the product/fruit of *his and Elizabeth's* love for each other, as much as indeed this child "belongs to *them*," even more so this child is the fruit of *God's* love, even more so this child belongs in truth to *God Himself*. And this, undoubtedly, is the way in which they raised their only son, less focused upon what the miracle of his birth said about what he would or could do, than on what it said about who he was one especially beloved and chosen by God. Perhaps this made it possible for them eventually to accept when the time would come that harsh reality that this boy (their son) (despite all his obvious talent and ability, skill and charm, beauty and popularity, athleticism and wit) would nonetheless *never* grow up to enjoy all the success, esteem, and prosperity that the world can offer, nor would he even benefit from the comfort and support of a loving wife, nor the joy and promise of raising his own kids (their grandkids) one day. Yes, the angel does share the joyful news that the boy would turn many Israelites back to God, but the angel does not share word that their son would do so through a solitary life in the desert, a life of rigorous asceticism and poverty, of dining on locusts and wild honey for survival, and of enduring persecution and martyrdom, at a terribly young age.

For John, given the way he was raised, clearly knew from the beginning, that he was favored by God and chosen by God and sent by God to prepare the way for the Lord. But equally important, as we see in today's second reading, he also understood that he was a terrible sinner and in need, like everyone else, of a savior and redeemer. Such that even when the crowds tried hard to put him on too high a pedestal, John resists that terrible temptation, insisting: "What you suppose me to be, I am not. I am not even worthy to unfasten his sandals." Thus, John was raised knowing well not only who he *was* but also who he *was not*.

Which brings us back to that question with which we began, "What, then, will this child be?" Not only as a priest, but as a teacher, I believe it is one of the most important

questions, if not *the* most important, that any parent/teacher/coach/mentor/scout leader can ask again and again and hopefully by a sincere living and a sharing of our Christian faith by both our words and by our example we can help all the children for whom we are responsible to know and to believe the answer. It is *far* more important and relevant a question to be asked and answered than what will my kid do? Or, what great achievements/honors will my child accomplish/receive? Or, how high will my child rise in his career, his financial security, or in society overall? And, it is also such a very *different* a question than that which the kids are asked daily by our culture of materialism and individualism, on the TV, radio, the computer, and from one other, as well, namely “How much of life’s pleasures and of this world’s attributes will you, child, be able to enjoy/experience/possess before you die or for that matter even before you even grow up?”

And so, as we gather again this Sunday to receive nourishment in the Eucharist and to bring all that we offer for this mass to be laid upon the altar, let us in a particular way on this solemnity of the birth of John the Baptist bring our young people, our children, scouts, ball players, and students. Never taking for granted that the kids just somehow know it already, but let us place on the Altar our commitment to consistently remind them of their true worth and dignity. Their true status not only as *our* beloved sons and daughters but even more truly as the sons and daughters of a Most loving divine Father, and, let us commit during this Mass to challenge them, as did the parents of John the Baptist, to live this dignity not as the result of any self-merit, but as the fruit of the loving sacrifice of a divine Brother who died for us, and whose sandals we too are unworthy to unfasten. To Him alone belongs all glory and honor. Never, even during the most stubborn and prideful days of adolescence, do young people cease to value the voice and the example of their parents, not even among the cacophony of voices they hear each day. Though admittedly, they may never until adulthood, at least be willing to acknowledge it.

Bill, that student of whom I spoke earlier, is now in graduate school out in Florida, still kind of weighing his options on specifically what to do with all his many skills and talents, but regardless of what he ultimately settles upon, I rejoice heartily that

he (and so many of his classmates) are still aware of who they really are. The rest I am most confident will undoubtedly take care of itself.