

Readings for Today: *Isaiah 49: 1 – 6; Acts 13: 22 – 26; Ps 139 (138) Luke 1: 57 – 66, 80.*

Today's Feast falls at a turning point in the year – in the Northern hemisphere it is traditionally called Midsummer Day; and commentators on the Birth of the Baptist have made much of this fact. Saint Augustine points out that from this day (in the North of course) the days grow shorter, illustrating John's words about the relationship between himself and Jesus: *He must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3: 30).

There are hints in the New Testament of some rivalry between disciples of John and of Jesus, and the evangelists are concerned to show the true relationship between them. So, most of what the New Testament has to say about John holds in tension two themes. First, that John was the God-appointed Forerunner of Christ, who *came for testimony to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him* – and secondly, that, greatest though he was of the prophets, *he was not that light, but came to bear witness to that light* (John 1: 7).

Today's liturgy naturally emphasises the importance of John's role in the beginnings of our salvation. In the canticle *Benedictus* John's father Zechariah speaks of him as *a prophet of God, the Most High, who will go ahead of the Lord* – that is of Christ – *to prepare his ways before him* (Luke 1:76): and that is what he does. He preaches a message of repentance and gathers disciples – but he directs them away from himself and towards Jesus. He speaks of Jesus as *the bridegroom* and himself as *the friend of the bridegroom...who rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice* (John 3: 29). And, when he is asked directly who he is, he disclaims all titles, calling himself simply *a voice* (John 1: 19 – 23).

Yet Jesus will acclaim him as *a prophet and more than a prophet... truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist* (Matthew 11: 11). He will describe him as *a burning and shining light* (John 5: 35).

But always there is the insistence that John's task is to lead people to Jesus, because, as Saint Augustine writes: "John was a voice for a time, but Christ, who *in the beginning was the Word*, is the Word in eternity."

We thank God for the witness of the Baptist to Jesus – the true Light of the World.