

Today we celebrate with thanksgiving the life of John the Baptist the forerunner of Christ. John's parents Zechariah and Elizabeth were from Priestly descent. Zechariah descended from Abijah and Elizabeth from Aaron. When it was Zechariah's turn to offer incense in the temple the Angel Gabriel appeared to him and tells him that they would have a son and that they should name him John. Zechariah tells the angel that he and his wife were old and therefore he wondered as to how this would come about. Because of his unbelief he is made dumb till the baby was to be born. John the Baptist was the one who was to prepare the way for the one who was to come namely Jesus, he was to be the voice of the one calling in the wilderness asking the people to repent of their sins and turning to God so that they may be saved from the wrath of God.

Just as the angel Gabriel had promise Elizabeth became pregnant and she gave birth to a son. Now we see that John true to his name that Yahweh has shown mercy reveals the mercy that the Lord had shown to Elizabeth in the midst of her relatives. The relatives rejoiced with her. On the eighth day when they were to circumcise the child they were going to name him Zechariah. However, the father insisted that he was to be called John. Zechariah asks for a writing tablet and he writes the name of the child as John. Immediately after this Zechariah's mouth was opened and he began to talk.

Zechariah praises the Lord, God of Israel because he had looked favourably on the people of Israel. John is told that he will be called a prophet of the Most High. John is to be Yahweh's prophet. He is to make known a new knowledge of salvation – the coming of Jesus – the forgiveness of sins. He was to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus. John is the precursor/forerunner of Jesus

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. The passage was one of repentance in the face of divine judgement. His object was not to get more people baptised, but to call the repentant and restored people of God from the imminent judgment. Baptism was a symbol of repentance and of belonging to the true remnant of the people of God.

John was calling for a single initiatory baptism indicating the beginning of a new commitment. The most likely precedent was the ritual cleansing by Gentiles on becoming a proselyte. But the shocking thing about this is that John is asking the Jews to undergo the same initiatory ritual required by the Gentile convert. John was clearly showing that it was not good enough to be 'born a Jew' but one had to be born of the water and the Spirit. In the same manner John's message rings aloud for us – that we are called to leave our evil ways behind – repent – turn around and turn to Christ – not be fooled by believing that 'I have been born in a Christian family and therefore I am okay'. God has no grandchildren. We all have to be born anew as individuals by asking for forgiveness and accepting his offer of eternal life.

John's message was also one of humility. He preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The birth that the Spirit brings about is a spiritual birth which is quite different to the physical birth. Life in God's Kingdom does not depend on a human source. If the source is flesh i.e. human nature then it will remain like that. But if its source is the Spirit true spiritual life will result. The work of God's Holy Spirit is like the wind which human beings cannot control nor have the authority over it. It blows wherever it wishes. The Holy Spirit is Sovereign and he works as he pleases in the renewal of human hearts.

We too are called to prepare the way like John the Baptist and be ready for the Lord's coming by living our lives as the people of God. We are called to Repent of our sins – Don't trust in your birth and your caste – because that will not take us anywhere. Be baptised with God's Holy Spirit. The Spirit is available to all who respond to the good news of Jesus Christ – no matter how bad a person you have been because Jesus Christ came to save sinners. May we truly repent of our sins and follow Christ