

The Nativity of John the Baptist (2012)
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

Flaming June? This year a wash-out. Floods in Wales last week; in West Yorkshire this weekend. And we have now arrived at the point in the year when the nights start to draw in. That is what today's feast marks. As everyone knows Jesus' birthday occurs in the depths of winter when finally light begins to triumph over darkness. What fewer people know is that John the Baptist's birthday is its polar opposite. John is reported as saying "He (Jesus) must increase; I must decrease"; and that is reflected in the choice of dates for celebrating their birthdays. Jesus' as light gains the upper hand and the hours of day-light get longer; and John's as light begins to fade earlier.

This works though, only in the northern hemisphere. I used to campaign gently to have Christmas celebrated in June in Cape Town in order to maintain the symbolism. But since their winters are generally warmer than our summers, and night falls fairly consistently all year round, I was never going to be taken seriously.

It is Luke who tells us about the birth of John, in a story that weaves in parallel with the birth-story of Jesus. At each stage John is shown to be great but Jesus is greater. John is wondrously born to aged parents and when Elizabeth is said to be barren; Jesus is miraculously born of a virgin.

Grown-up John is generally thought to be a wild figure, with a curious diet - dressed in hairy skins and chewing on locusts; something of an oddity. He plays his role as herald and then passes on. Actually John was the phenomenon of his age. No prophetic voice had been heard in the land for five hundred years. John broke that mighty silence with a mighty voice, that reverberated through the land and drew people for all corners. Jerusalem emptied as people flocked to the Jordan to hear him preach and undergo his watery penance. John's baptism was for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Of course, Judaism had a system for the forgiveness of sins: Sacrifice in the Temple, morning and evening, for the remission of personal sins; the solemn ceremonies of the Day of Atonement for the forgiveness of the sins of the nation. John subverts that ancient ritual; and undermines the role of the priests and the Temple itself. This is a subversion that Jesus will continue, culminating in his cleansing of the Temple, a symbolic act that announces the forthcoming destruction of the Temple. When Jesus dies the veil of the Temple is ripped from top to bottom. Jesus replaces the atonement ritual of the Temple by his dying for our sake.

John was Jesus' mentor. It was John's voice that called Jesus from obscurity in remote, despised Nazareth ("Can anything good come from that place?" asks an incredulous Nathanael). It was John Jesus' imitated when he took his first steps as a wandering, baptising preacher (Jesus is John come back to life, said an incredulous Herod), before finding his own ministry of teaching in parables, healing, exorcising demons and, above all, engaging in table fellowship. Jesus will say of John, "Of all men born of woman, none is greater than John". An astonishing accolade. John would

wonder from his prison-cell whether his erstwhile pupil was 'the one who is to come', but Jesus seems to have held John in the highest regard to the end. The student continued to respect his teacher even when the learner has gone far beyond his mentor's tuition and forged his own understanding, his own way. John's fate, executed at the hands of a paranoid who feared John's criticism and the crowds he could summon, was the clearest sign of Jesus' own impending destiny.

In dying he went before the Lord whom he had proclaimed since doing a dance in his mother's womb to acknowledge the presence of his Lord. The meteor that was John faded as meteor's do, but the burst of energy illuminated the way of the one who is the greatest of Lights.