

Nativity of John the Baptist - Vigil - 6/24/07 - Jer 1:4-10; 1 Pet 1:8-12; Lk 1:5-17

1. Once upon a time there were two young boys:
 - a. While most boys their age were playing with toy soldiers or footballs,
 - b. These two boys began to have questions about God.
 - c. The problem was they did not know where to find the answers.
 - i. Both had parents who were not practicing members of a religious tradition,
 - (1) and they never spoke about God.
 - d. So what the boys did was to go to church.
 - i. All the churches in fact.
 - (1) All summer long they visited all the churches in their town.
 - (2) but since they went during the week, they were all locked.
 - (3) with one exception - the Catholic Church
 - (a) It was open and then went in.
 - (b) They fell in love with the light of the candles
 - (i) and the smell of the incense
 - (c) They fell in love with the paintings on the walls
 - (i) and the statues
 - (d) but most of all they fell in love with the peace and quiet;
 - (4) that church seemed to be a place where they could ask their questions, and sit in peace and wait for answers.
2. I tell that story as a fairy tale because to many it would be; at least nowadays:
 - a. For after **sex scandals** that have robbed most people of their trust in the church
 - b. After **priest shortages** which have robbed many parishes of even having mass
 - c. After the wholesale **manipulation** of religious faith by so many as a justification for terrorism and war
 - d. After the wholesale **rejection** of religious faith by so many as a reaction to that manipulation
 - e. People of faith have done more than enough to turn most people off to religion
 - i. before they ever get through the church door.
 - f. And if our children **do** have questions about religion,
 - i. often the last place they would look is the church,
 - g. Preferring instead to paste together a religious faith
 - i. from good luck charms, video games and re-runs of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.
3. It is not surprising that so many books about atheism have been written lately
 - a. and that they have become so popular.
 - b. For as a friend of mine once said to me when I said, "believing in things you cannot see - isn't that the definition of faith?"
 - c. "No Don" he replied."that is the definition of a psychosis."
4. Perhaps.
5. And yet we cannot ignore the questions of those two young boys
 - a. nor their longing for answers.

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6. Nor can we ignore the fact that even atheists and non believers
 - a. are defined by what they are not - they have no God they are NON believers;
7. So it would seem that none of us can shake our questions - even if we decide there are no answers.
8. And in that
9. **We have something in common** with the prophet Jeremiah.
 - a. We tend to think that prophets by definition have the answers
 - i. but not Jeremiah
 - ii. We hear his terror and his inadequacy,
 - iii. his uncertainty, in effect his questions in the first reading,
 - iv. when that longing in his heart which was the call of God
 - v. propelled him to speak God's word to his own people
 - (1) even though he knew they would reject him.
10. **We have something in common** with the Christians in today's second reading
 - a. for its author assures them that they have found faith
 - i. despite the fact that they never saw Jesus ,
 - ii. and then argues that the prophets (such as Jeremiah)
 - (1) never saw him either,
 - (2) yet still they spoke of him,
 - (3) and thus believed in him.
 - (4) And because of their witness, so do they.
 - b. But if they needed to be assured in the first place,
 - i. then they, like we, must have had questions with few easy answers
11. But most importantly
12. **we have something in common** with Zechariah
 - a. The gospel is clear that both he and his wife Elizabeth were good and
 - b. blameless people
 - i. righteous in the eyes of the Lord.
 - c. But note it says nothing about everyone else's eyes;
 - i. And that was because Elizabeth was barren.
 - d. Nowadays that would be sad; back then it was a disaster;
 - i. a barren woman could produce no heir
 - ii. And thus the only question anyone could ask was
 - (1) what they had done to be so cursed.
 - e. Perhaps that was part of the reason why Zechariah reacted with fear the angel announced that he was to be the father of a great prophet, John.
 - f. Perhaps that is why in the part of the story immediately following the passage, Zechariah demands answers from the angel, and then is immediately struck dumb so that he could no longer demand - he had to learn to sit with his questions - just like Jeremiah; just like us all.

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13. It is precisely these unanswered questions that unite us:
 - a. Believer and nonbeliever.
14. It is precisely these unanswered questions that divide us, for they are offered by some as the reason for their unbelief
15. And rejected out of hand by others who already have all the answers.
16. And yet, what if it were precisely our questions and not the answers that are the proof of God's existence?
 - a. I mean solely the fact that we ASK means that we have experienced something that makes us ask a question with no easy answer.
 - b. And it is then only the way that we approach that question which reveals to us whether we are believers or non believers/
 - i. Well then we would see what many have longed to see;
 - (1) we would see Zechariah's silencing not as a punishment but as a blessing
 - (2) The first Christian's doubt not as a weakness but as a strength
 - (3) Jeremiah's fear not as the end of faith but as the beginning of wisdom
 - (4) And the longing of those two young boys not as craziness but as a vocation.
17. Because indeed it was; for those two young boys continued in their search;
 - a. One of them became a priest in 1990 - that was my cousin Father Richard;
 - i. and the other one was me.
18. And while I cannot speak for Richard,
 - a. I know that the reason why I became a believer
 - b. and the reason why I am still a Catholic
 - c. is not because the Church has all the answers -
 - i. to assert that would be blasphemy - Only God has all the answers;
 - d. but because despite the sex scandals and the priest shortages,
 - e. the scandalous manipulation of the faithful by politicians on one hand
 - f. and the equally scandalous rejection of the faith by pundits on the other
 - g. The Church is still the place we can sit
 - i. And pray, and read, and sing and think and listen and discuss and ask our questions
 - (1) Knowing that our questions are not a curse, a weakness, or evidence of lack of faith
 - (2) but they are the response to the presence of God in our lives;
 - (a) they are the way God reveals God's choice of us
 - (b) They are our vocation.