

His name is John.

Today would be a good day to be tempted to look at how the early Churches have taken over pagan dates to celebrate. Yes...major festivals were allocated to high pagan days, displacing them. The concept of the calendar as we know it matters not: it would be too easy to get carried away with this, that and the other, but fear not: the point is actually the point of celebrating that something happened, not so much the memorial.

One of my family members who is part of a pseudo-Christian sect, known for their sending in pairs to doors, points out to me often that we're in error, or heretics, for actually using the calendar to commemorate things. "It's not in the bible he was born then..." Reading back what we now do into history is always fraught with difficulties, and can obscure what it is we are actually remembering.

For us, we've passed the shortest day. In the northern hemisphere in the regions of Wiltshire, the druids have all taken off their drag and headed home after dancing around what my good friends at St Laurence, Downton, call "a bunch of rocks." We're now gearing heading towards Christmas, itself also a few days after the longest or shortest day, depending where you are!

So, what is it that makes the keeping of the birth of John the Baptist important? There is no doubt that for the early Church, John was an important figure, and later, a concern. Luke's account of John, remembering that he was setting out to try and make sense of everything, draws on some wonderful symmetry of image, prophecy and tradition.

John's conception was most both heralded and annunciated. Luke draws heavily on the messenger of God being very much part of this. Zechariah had won the lottery to place incense within the Holy of Holies. This is where only the priest drawn out of traditional lot could enter. This was to place yourself in the same place as the herald angel, Gabriel. The first time we encounter this particular angel in our scriptures is in the book of Daniel.

Whilst in the Holy of Holies, Zechariah comes face to face with Gabriel. As a priest was at the altar of incense tending his duties, the one who stands in the presence of God was also there. What happens next is that the birth of John is foretold. Like most annunciation stories, there is an immediate scoffing. The missus is old, I'm even older, and if you think that will happen, you better think again. And so, Gabriel renders him dumb. There is no point imagining how Zechariah was going to explain that to Elizabeth!

We remember all of this four days after the September equinox, just to keep track of the calendar. It is exactly 9 months from the June solstice.

Gabriel appears again in the story, this time to a young faithful girl who had found favour with God. Her name was Mary. We remember this story four days just past March equinox, nine months before the December solstice. I'm beginning to think that there might be a pattern.

Gabriel greeted Mary, and like the news he had for Zechariah, the angel or messenger of God was immediately challenged. "How can this be? Look how young I am!" So, to put her at ease, Gabriel points out to Mary that her kinsfolk Elizabeth, advanced in years is now in her third trimester, for nothing is impossible for God. In consenting, Mary immediately ran off to her cousin the hills, and at the sound of her voice, the unborn baptist leapt for joy in her womb. Luke recalls the moment with a recounting of the Song of Hannah, the song we now sing each night as *the Magnificat*.

We're not sure how long Mary stayed with Elizabeth, but tradition suggests she was there until the birth of John the Baptist, whom we commemorate today. The birth to one who was considered barren brought great joy to all of the family. The shame of the one improbably old and barren giving birth gave way to joy, for the moment. Mary, enduring the shame of one improbably young and single would understand the joy of the birth, but her son would not meet his cousin for some time yet to come.

Now, we get into a bit more of tradition. The first born was usually named in honour of the father or part of his family. That is quite common in many families. Looking at my family tree, there are common names passed from generations to generations, mainly being visited on the first born. Other family names tend to appear at different points as well. When it came time to circumcise and name him the family stepped in. As Zechariah couldn't speak, they would speak on behalf of him. Elizabeth's opinion was just that, an opinion. Naming was men's business, as I guess, was the bris.

His name is John.

Luke leaves out a few details of what is happening at this point, assuming that we would actually know, or perhaps he felt that we might feel uncomfortable knowing about what is actually happening. To circumcise the child, on the eighth day (I will spare you the surgical details) the child is brought to the synagogue to be presented to the *molah* who will perform the deed. The child is handed to another couple who present the child before the Chair of Elijah, where the ritual will be undertaken. The father would be one of the people who will hold the child during the moment, and then, would announce the name of the child at that point. As Zechariah could not speak, the presenting male, our equivalent of a *godparent* would speak on his behalf.

Elizabeth had made her intentions well known. His name is to be John, but like all matters in the synagogue, the woman was to remain silent. The arguments already happened along the way, and the result was simply that he would be called Zechariah. At the time of naming, Zechariah protests and signals for a tablet. What he writes fulfils the prophecy of Gabriel. His name is John.

So, what is in this name? *Yohanan* in Hebrew is made up, like many of the Jewish names in the Bible, of differing parts with meaning.

- Jacob was renamed: Yisra'el which means "the one who strives with God."
- Elijah means "The Lord is God."
- Elisha is means "The Lord is salvation", El being the Hebrew word for God. Hijah means "The Lord" and "Yesha" means salvation.
- From Yesha we get Yeshua, Jesus, from which we get deliverer, saviour, God saves.

So, what of John?

Yohanan is made up of Jeho, and hanan. Jeho: Yeho: God, and chanan: gracious. God is gracious.

Not only are we playing around with the solstice and equinox, the names are beginning to form and interesting pattern!

Starting from Jacob, and going through the great prophets Elijah, Elisha, then John, and Jesus, we get to the story of God's love for us.

- We strive with God.
- The Lord is God
- The Lord is salvation.
- God is gracious.
- God saves.

When Zechariah writes the words "Jehohanan", his name is John, it is a naming that is both prayerfully thankful and prophetic. God being gracious, this is the child who will make straight the path of the Lord; baptise Jesus and teach of God's grace; and reveal to the world the true nature of the one who is to come: Jesus – Son of God and Saviour.

Today's reading misses out the Song of Zechariah in which he prophesies the future of his Son. "You my child will be called a prophet of the most High." Jesus himself said of John there is none other greater who has been born of woman. The reality of this birth is important. And here, we remember John's place, four days after the solstice, and just six months before we gather to remember the birth of Jesus.

For us, this strange aligning of dates and names is part of our story. This is the same story that we are told to pass on from generation to generation. We are called to *strive* with God; make known that the Lord is one, the Lord is God; The Lord is our salvation and gracious; and it is in Jesus that our salvation is made complete.

And this story, an interesting quadrilateral of annunciation and births, is recalled at times when we can all be certain of what is happening. Four days after the significant passing of seasons as measured by the sun. The calendar doesn't matter, but what does is that we remember. Today, we remember simply this.

HIS NAME IS JOHN. The Lord is indeed gracious.