

Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist

Dear Parishioners,

It took some time for the Church to establish feast days and liturgical festivals to commemorate the great events of salvation history as well as to honour the principal agents of God's gracious providence. The churches of the East were quicker off the mark than the church in Rome and in the Latin West. The reason was because they were physically closer to where the events commemorated took place. It is no surprise that some of the greatest Christian feasts had their origins in the traditions of the church in Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

In Rome by about the 6th century the birth of Jesus was celebrated to coincide with the mid-winter festival of the ancient Romans, the feast of the invincible sun-god. The coincidence made sense because at the darkest moment of the year the Roman church was able to celebrate the arrival of "the Light of the world." We know that mid-winter was a moment of celebration among the Celtic Irish (the paleolithic burial chamber at New Grange had a narrow corridor which is penetrated by the light of the sun at dawn on 21 December) and the German tribes, so introducing Christmas into their calendar after conversion to the faith was quite easy and smooth. The Church also marks mid-summer with the Solemnity of St. John the Baptist. It was John who said, after meeting Jesus on the banks of the Jordan, "he must increase, I must decrease". Indeed, as of 22 June the days grow steadily if imperceptibly shorter right until they begin again to grow longer at mid-winter (the birthday of Jesus).

The Church built its own calendar of feasts and commemorations into the already existing pattern of pagan celebrations which she found in the various cultures she evangelised throughout her early history. Missionaries who carried the gospel across Europe often chose the sacred sites of the peoples they converted to build churches. Of course, this in-culturation of the calendar and the dovetailing of our Christian traditions into the pattern of feasts dictated by the changes in the natural world works very well in the Northern hemisphere. Missionaries in Australia or in South America must have found it very difficult to work with the lack of harmony between the liturgical calendar and the solar calendar in the Southern hemisphere. We find it peculiar to imagine Christmas dinner as a picnic on Bondi Beach or Advent being a time of increasing heat in Chile. Pope Francis, who has spent most of his life in Argentina, must find it hard to struggle with cold and darkness in Rome at Christmas or cope with Easter as launching the springtime (an idea with strong theological repercussions!) while he has been used to Easter as signalling autumn in his native Argentina. We are so lucky to celebrate the birth of John the Baptist at mid-summer, he who preached and ministered in the desert and did it all in the open air - I can imagine the heat! All these random reflections occasioned by the coincidence of the nativity of John with mid-summer may incite us, who live in the Northern hemisphere, on what our feasts and the dates on which they are celebrated tell us of their true significance.

Father Patrick