

**Reflection on the Gospel-Birthday of John the Baptizer  
(Luke 1:57-66, 80)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Today's gospel is a good news story. Most of us respond with joy to the birth of a child, especially when the odds are stacked against the parents conceiving. As the child grows to maturity, friends and family might look back and interpret later achievements in the light of childhood expectation and promise. Stories of birth and childhood are often told in the light of later events. The story of the birth of John the Baptizer is told with hindsight and against the background of Jewish expectations in the Second Temple period. The gospel writers reflect on the role John played in recognising the significance of Jesus of Nazareth and in pointing to Jesus as the unique agent and prophet of God's empire over against the Roman Empire.

Luke is the only gospel writer to reflect on John's "pre-history" and to hint that his birth belonged within the biblical tradition of the "wondrous" births of remarkable people. He interprets the birth of John as an expression of God's "great mercy". Luke narrates the childhood story of John in parallel and yet in appropriate relationship with the story of the child Jesus, whose identity and mission represent the ultimate revelation of Israel's God.

In announcing the birth of John the Baptizer, storyteller Luke uses the language of fulfilment: "the time came" [for Elizabeth to give birth] is literally "the time was fulfilled". The birth of this child is a time of the fulfilment of God's word, as previously announced by the angel Gabriel to his father Zechariah (Luke 1:13-17). Zechariah had been told not to fear, for his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son and "you will name him John".

Joy and gladness would be the response to the birth of this child who was to be "filled with Holy Spirit even before his birth". John's destiny was "to make ready a people". Jesus, the one for whom John is "preparing the way" will later refer to him as "a prophet" and "more than a prophet" (Luke 7:27). Zechariah, who refuses to believe that he and Elizabeth will have a child in their advanced years, is told that he will be mute "until the day these things occur" (1:17). "These things" encompass the birth of the child, the joy-filled response of the faith community and the naming of the child eight days after birth. John's name, meaning "YHWH (the God of Israel) has shown grace", foreshadows the extraordinary mark that this child, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, will make on his world and consequently on ours. Like John, we are called to "make ready a people", to prepare the way. For Australian Catholics, commitment to creative participation in the forthcoming Plenary Council preparations might be a fitting way to celebrate this feast.