

THE NATIVITY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

(Luke 1:57-68)

(Poem Vol. 1, pp. 111-8; Gospel Vol. 1, pp. 137-45)

(Mary has been staying at the home of Her aged cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zacharias, helping Elizabeth through a difficult pregnancy. The time is fast approaching for the baby to be born, and Elizabeth expresses a fear that she might not survive childbirth, and that Zacharias could be left alone to look after the child. Mary offers Elizabeth some comfort, and says to her:)

'...God has given you the joy of being a mother, and He will not take this joy away from you when it is full. Little John will receive all the kisses of his mummy, and Zacharias all the attentions of his faithful wife - until the very end of his long life. You are two branches of the same tree. One will not die, leaving the other alone.'

'You are good, and You comfort me. But I am so old to have a son. And now that I am about to have one, I am afraid.'

'Oh! No! There is Jesus here. We must not be afraid where there is Jesus. My Child relieved your pain, (you said that yourself, when He was just a bud newly formed). Jesus is becoming more and more mature, and He already lives as My Creature. I can feel - in My throat - the beating of His little heart. And I feel... that He will remove all dangers from you. You must have faith.'

'I have. But if I should die... don't leave Zacharias at once. I know that You are concerned with Your own house. But please remain here a little longer to help my husband in his first days of sorrow.'

'I shall stay to take delight in your joy and in the joy of your husband, and I will leave you when you are strong and happy...'

'Yes, I think I am beginning to suffer again. Perhaps my time has come. Mary, pray for me.'

'I will support you with My prayer, until your labour ends in joy.'

Elizabeth withdraws to her rooms. Mary - a capable and provident woman - gives the necessary instructions, prepares everything that may be necessary, and at the same time, She comforts Zacharias, who is worried.

In the house that is sleepless that night - and where one can hear the strange voices of women called in to help - Mary is watchful like a lighthouse on a stormy night. The whole house rotates around Her, and She sees to everything, smiling sweetly. And She prays... And when She sees Zacharias sleeping with his head resting on his arms across the table, She takes off Her sandals (to make no noise), walks barefoot, and making less noise than a butterfly She flutters around the room, and She takes Zacharias' mantle, and lays it on him so gently that he continues to sleep... Then She starts praying again, this time more and more intensely, while kneeling down. And She raises Her arms when the painful cries of Elizabeth become heart-rending.

Sarah comes in and says: 'My mistress wants You.'

'I am coming' says Mary as She walks along the house, goes upstairs... She looks like a white angel, wandering in the peaceful starry night. She goes into Elizabeth's room.

'Oh! Mary! Mary! What a pain! I can't stand it any longer, Mary! How much pain one must suffer to be a mother!'

Mary caresses her lovingly, and kisses her.

'Mary! Mary! Let me put my hands on Your bosom!'

Mary takes the two wrinkled and swollen hands, and lays them on Her round abdomen, pressing them tightly with Her smooth, slender little hands. And She speaks in a low voice, now that they are alone: 'Jesus is here, and He hears and sees you. Have faith, Elizabeth. His holy heart is beating more strongly because He is acting for your good. I can feel it throbbing as though I were holding it in My hands. And I understand the words that My Child says to Me. He is now saying: "Tell the woman not to be afraid. Only a little more pain. And then - with the first rays of the sun, and among the many roses awaiting the morning's rays to open out on their stems - her house will have the most beautiful rose, and it will be John, My Predecessor".'

Elizabeth now presses her face against Mary's bosom, and weeps gently...

Some time goes by, and Elizabeth is in the throes of pain once again. Mary kisses her, goes downstairs... and sees that the old man is still sleeping, and moaning in his sleep. Mary makes a gesture of compassion, and starts to pray once again.

More time passes... The light begins to filter in through the partly open door... The old man and Mary move towards the door. They are pale because of the sleepless night, and the light at dawn makes them look even more pale. Mary puts on Her sandals, and goes to the foot of the staircase and listens. A woman looks out, nods, and then goes back inside. Nothing yet.

Mary goes into the room, and comes back with some warm milk which She gives to the old man... He is walking up and down the garden very nervously. Mary looks at him compassionately... and She pours Her consolation onto him.

They are standing, one beside the other in the sun... and this is where the joyful news reaches them: 'He is born! He is born! It's a boy! Happy father! A boy as beautiful as a rose, as beautiful as the sun, as strong and good as his mother! Joy for you, father, blessed by the Lord Who gave you a son that you may offer him to the Temple! Glory to God, Who has granted posterity to this house!...'

Mary blesses the Lord, weeping for joy. Then the two receive the little one, who has been brought to the father, that he may bless him. Zacharias receives the child, who is screaming desperately, but he does not go to his wife.

Mary goes instead, carrying with love the little one, who becomes quiet, as soon as She takes him in Her arms. The woman who is following Her notices this, and she says to Elizabeth: 'Woman, your child became quiet as soon as She took him. Look how peacefully he is sleeping, and only Heaven knows how restless and strong he is...'

Mary lays the creature near his mother and caresses her, tidying up her grey hair. 'The rose is born' She whispers in a low voice, 'and you are alive. Zacharias is happy.'

'Does he speak?'

'Not yet. But hope in the Lord. Rest now. I am with you.'

[...] (***Maria takes up the story again...***) I see the house rejoicing. It is the day of the circumcision. There are lots of people. Mary has made sure that everything is beautiful and in good order... She moves amongst the various groups. She is very lovely in Her most beautiful white dress.

Elizabeth, respected by everybody as a matron, is most happily enjoying her feast. The child is laid on her lap, filled with milk.

It is now the moment for the circumcision.

The men say: 'We will call him Zacharias. You are old. It is only fair that the child be called after you.'

'Not at all!' exclaims Elizabeth. 'His name is John. His name must be the witness of the power of God.'

'But has there ever been a John in our kinship?'

'It doesn't matter, his name is to be John.'

'What do you say, Zacharias? You want him to have your name, don't you?'

Zacharias shakes his head in denial. He takes his tablet and writes: 'His name is John.' And as soon as he finishes writing, he adds, with his tongue now free: 'because God has granted a great grace to me, his father, to his mother, and to this new servant of His who will spend his life for the glory of the Lord, and will be called great forever in the world and in the eyes of God, because he will give converted hearts to the Most High Lord. The angel said so, and I did not believe. But now I believe, and the Light is now in me. The Light is amongst us, but you do not see it. It is its destiny not to be seen, because the souls of men are encumbered and idle. But my son will see It, and will speak of It, and will turn the hearts of the just in Israel to It. Oh! Blessed are those who believe in It and will always believe in the Word of the Lord. And blessed be You, O Eternal Lord, God of Israel, because You have visited and redeemed Your people, and You have raised up for us a powerful Saviour in the house of Your servant David. Just as You promised - by mouth of the holy Prophets from ancient times - that You would save us from our enemies, and from the hands of all who hate us. You promised to show Your mercy to our ancestors, and thus to remember Your holy covenant. This is the oath

You swore to our father Abraham: that You would grant us freedom from fear, and deliverance from the hands of our enemies. So that we will serve You in Heaven and thrive in Your presence all our days' and he continues to the end [of the canticle].

The people present are most surprised at the name, at the miracle, and at the words of Zacharias.

Elizabeth, who at the first words of Zacharias had uttered a cry of joy, is now weeping. She embraces Mary, Who is happily caressing her.

I do not see the circumcision. I only see them bring back John, who is screaming at the top of his voice. He is kicking like a little colt, and not even his mother's breast can calm him down. Then Mary takes him, and lulls him. And he becomes quiet, and lies down peacefully.

'Now just look!' says Sarah. 'He is quiet only when She picks him up!'

The people begin to go away slowly. In the room now there are only Mary, holding the baby in Her arms, and Elizabeth, who is most happy.

Zacharias comes in, and closes the door. He looks at Mary with his eyes full of tears... He moves forward, and kneels down in front of Mary. 'Bless the poor servant of the Lord' he says to Her. 'Bless him, because You can do so, since You are carrying Him in Your womb. The word of the Lord was spoken to me when I admitted my error and believed everything I had been told. I see You, and Your happy destiny. I adore the God of Jacob in You. You are my first Temple, where once again as a priest, I can pray to the Eternal Father again. You are blessed, because You obtained grace for the world, and You are now bringing the Saviour to it. Forgive Your servant if he did not see Your majesty before. When You came here, You brought us all the graces. Because everywhere You go, O Full of Grace, God works His miracles, And holy are those walls which You enter, holy become the ears which listen to Your voice, and holy the flesh You touch. Holy the hearts, because You grant graces, Mother of the Most High, Virgin of the Prophets, expected to bring the Saviour to the people of God.'

Mary smiles, full of humility [...] And the vision ends with the paleness of Mary, and Her tears cause Her eyes to shine brightly.