

There are some things in life that are impossible - like not being able to see our faces except in reflection. Hearing what people's expectations of us at the time we were born is another.

I wonder what the parents Zachariah and Elizabeth of John thought about him, or what the neighbours and villagers thought as they would have known something of his extraordinary birth.

It was probably a good thing John could not hear all this. What a weight of expectation on his shoulders, not just from his parents but from the whole community, and, indeed, from God. All parents have high hopes for their children but there's a fine line between hopes that hold out opportunities in contrast to fixed expectations that a child is forced towards fulfilling. We cannot have a master plan for other people's lives; hopes and dreams certainly, supported by the help, encouragement and freedom to become who God has made them. The challenge for Zechariah and Elizabeth was to raise John to be himself so that he could be what he was called to be for others. I remember my parents saying, on more than one occasion as I was finding my way in life, "so long as you do the best you can and are happy with what you are doing, that is enough for us" and I'm so grateful that, rather than some unrealisable attainment, that was what they expected of me. I wonder what people said when each of you was born, and what they expected for and of you.

God has given us the gift of each other to love, respect, enjoy and encourage, but not to control. John was first and foremost a gift to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and I sense that is how they received him. Some children grow up with enormous expectations on them, often from parents or grandparents. It is impossible to live up to other people's

expectations and it is not just in childhood that intolerable expectations are placed on people expectations in the work place can sometimes seem to be higher than we think we can manage.

We celebrate John the Baptist's birth this week on the 24th and we heard from the Gospel of St Luke. Luke is interested in telling us about his birth but makes only a passing reference to his death, whereas Matthew and Mark tell us about his violent death but ignore his birth.

If the people around John at his birth had high expectations, on the face of it they were dashed as John's life unfolded. John's parents were very elderly and it is likely that he was orphaned as a child. We know he lived in the wilderness and scholars speculate that he was raised at an orphanage for the children of priests which was run by the Essene community, the ruins of which have been found in the desert. He emerged from the wilderness to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, gained a following of disciples whom he then encouraged to follow Jesus, and eventually was imprisoned by King Herod whom he condemned for marrying his brother's wife. While in prison he had doubts about whether Jesus was the Messiah and sent his disciples to ask Jesus and Jesus affirmed his calling. This child, who bore so many expectations and was so faithful, ended up with a hard life, imprisonment and execution.

His parents never saw what John achieved.

The gospel reading we heard today ended, “The child – John – grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.” “He became strong in spirit” – that is the crucial phrase because that is what enabled John to face the uncertain future. For all of us, the more important question is not about our academic ability, our vocational work skills, our musical, artistic, athletic or any other sort of gifts and prowess, but whether we are growing strong in spirit, growing up into ourselves, waking up to God in our lives as we go with God on a journey into the unknown. Wherever it leads, we go with God.

Your vocation as baptised Christians is to hear God’s glad tidings, to be open to God and to grow up into yourself in God, to become more than you dream possible because God is leading and guiding you day by day. For all of us, John’s call comes ringing through the ages inviting us to respond to God’s gracious love, and to become strong in spirit.