

So he is my
head.

Today, when the Church celebrates the birthday of St John the Baptist, it's a very old festival; and an unusual one in the church calendar, for all saints feastsdays are normally the date, or as near as possible, on which they entered eternal life, NOT this present world. John the Baptist is an exception (his beheading is also commemorated, in August) - but then, he was an exceptional man. His birth into this world, and the extraordinary circumstances of it described in St Luke's gospel, heralded the immediate coming of God's ^{long-}promised, awaited Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ. He marks the end of the time of waiting - it's he who points out, in the last and greatest prophecy of the Old Testament time, that the Christ is here: Behold the Lamb of God, Him who takes away the sins of the world. In Christ's own words, no greater man was ever born than John the Baptist. So, understandably, his birth-day is a cause of joy and celebration. In the divine office for today's feast, which is recited or chanted by monks, religious and priests, there's an old, possibly 8th century hymn to St John the Baptist which has had, believe it or not, a very important influence on the development of music in the western world - just like that song from the film "The Sound of Music", an early 11th century setting of this hymn began each line on a consecutive note of the ^{now-}familiar scale. But nobody'd done anything like that before; so the origin of our do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti is the syllables ~~at~~ the beginning of each line of the first verse of this hymn to St John the Baptist. As we recite our prayer today, let's pray in our hearts that, with the help of St John, we may also be heralds of Christ, that we may decrease so that Christ can become more active, more important in us and through us.

PRAYERS

Angel 114
RHK

For a prayer in music, ^{the hymn to St John the Baptist. At present...} (I think the most suitable for today is the 'Benedictus' canticle, the song of Zachary after the naming of his son, John, in accordance with God's message)

What a person is called, the name he goes by, may not mean very much in modern western civilisation. But it did in the near-east of Biblical times, as it still does in ~~the~~ ^{many} places. Elizabeth & Zachary had prayed for a son, and were beyond natural hope of having a child when the fullness of God's time came & the ^{human} incarnation of the 2nd person of the Trinity was about to happen. It was made clear to Zachary, from the beginning, that not only was his prayer unexpectedly answered, out of season as it were (and Zachary wasn't too sure it could happen by then) but that the son he was to have would be very special person. It was to be all God's doing. He would be called a name chosen by God, a name unknown in Zachary's family. God's giving him that name meant a special mission - which was to be the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths: repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. He was to be the Baptist in water as a sign of repentance before the Lord's coming; the Forerunner, announcing the arrival of the gospel; the Bridegroom's friend, who knows the mystery of the Bridegroom but must remain in the background; the angel to prepare the Lord's way; the Prophet of the Most High, the last and greatest of the long line of God's spokesmen before the arrival of His own Son to speak and show by His life. God's care for mankind.

John had the personal problem of seeing that his own friends & disciples should leave him to follow the One whose sandals he was unworthy to untie.

The austere life John led, as a hermit in the desert, is rather boldly stated in the gospels — we don't really know that much about him. The Dead Sea Scrolls may have thrown some more light on the kind of life he led and the kind of environment and society in which he appeared. But the important thing about John is really his eclipse by Christ, for that was his mission. He had become well-known, even to people like Herod the King; and so strongly did he impress himself on that unpleasant character that, after he'd had him beleaguered, Herod was haunted by the thought of his coming back. The way of the Lord is always being prepared; and there must always be heralds of his coming. There must always be repentance in preparation for the coming of Christ in our lives and in our world. St John the Baptist is the man who points out forcibly that repentance, contrition, sorrow for sin is not old-fashioned & out-of-date. It's ^{today} reminds us we've to be bringers of Christ to the world around us, and ourselves become less & less important as Christ becomes more fully in control of our lives & guiding us in all we do and are.