Read: Luke 3:1-18

"Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could". Those of you familiar with The Sound of Music (is there anybody out there over the age of 25 who is not?) will recognise these words as sung by Maria, as she gazes adoringly into the eyes of the Captain - "so somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something good". I can hear you all singing!

The idea is important and humbling, though. Whatever happens in this world, whatever our unique contribution may be, all is built on what has gone before us. "Nothing comes from nothing". Many of us recognise this in keenly wanting to know about our ancestry - we recognise that those who have gone before us, or have played a part in our development along the way, have shaped who we are and what we are capable of doing. Every invention is technically just a miniscule development of all that has gone before. What has gone before is always important, because it determines what may happen next. That is the way the real world is.

Today we celebrate the arrival of John the Baptist into the world. We can easily underestimate the importance of this figure in our salvation story. Without going so far as to make the plainly very questionable statement that without John Jesus could not have fulfilled his mission, it is nevertheless clearly true that in God's plan for our salvation John's preparation, the ground John laid for Jesus, was very important.

Isaiah had, centuries before, forecast the arrival of John to "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (40:3-5). John called many to "Repent, for the kingdom of God is close at hand" (Matthew 3:2), he gathered many disciples, and he introduced a baptism as a sign of true repentance. With a recognition of his total unworthiness, he accepted Jesus' coming to him for baptism. He recognised that he was simply preparing the way for Jesus, "the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie", and having steered disciples of his own in the direction of Jesus he stepped back (and into prison) when his work was done (Luke 3:15-17).

"Nothing comes from nothing". God sent John to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry ("the word of God came to John" - Luke 3:2). Similarly, Jesus sent disciples out "ahead of him, into every town and place into which he himself was to come" (Luke 10:1). Today we fulfil the same role: every word and deed can announce the Good News and the coming of the kingdom, and prepare the way for the Spirit to come to others, which is, as we all know, our mission.

Rejoicing in the part we too play in God's plan, you can start singing again now.