

Address for the Feast of John the Baptist

Preached at a record service during the COVID-19 Pandemic

24 June 2020

In the third chapter of the Gospel of John Jesus has gone into the Judean countryside with his disciples 'and was baptising'. John's disciples tell him that many are going to Jesus for baptism. John takes the opportunity, again, to say that he is not the Messiah. Again he points to Jesus and, says, 'For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.'

In the first chapter of John's Gospel the writer said of him: 'He was not the light but came to bear witness to the light.' And a few verses later we hear John the Baptist point to Jesus and say, 'Here is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.'

The greatness of John the Baptist lies in the fact that when the true light appeared in the person of Jesus, he moved aside to make way for him.

Most of us will remember people who have been lights in this way for us: they will have guided, encouraged, sustained and nurtured us on our way and, at the right time, will have let us go. That is part of their greatness in our eyes. Many of them will be out of sight now, but, I hope not out of mind.

To make way, or to make room, for another person calls for humility and generosity of spirit. Indeed, it calls for a kind of dying to self.

The greatness of John the Baptist lies in the fact that he firmly refused to become the centre of his own movement. At every opportunity he pointed to "the one who was to come"; the one whose sandals he felt unworthy to undo. As John himself expressed it, "I must decrease that he might increase." This is another way of talking about 'dying to self.' John is showing us how important it is to be ready and open to re-orienting our life at different steps on our Christian pilgrimage.

Our states are slowly coming out of hibernation as our medical professionals continue to deal with and keep an eye on COVID-19. During the lockdown we have been unable to express the community of our Order, express community that we share in other areas of our daily life. The question for us is, 'How have we 'decreased' so that another may increase?'

Benedictine Sister Joan Chittester provides a way forward when she writes: 'Hospitality means we take people into the space that is our lives and our minds and our hearts and our work and our efforts. Hospitality is the way we come out of ourselves. It is the first step towards dismantling the

barriers of the world. Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudiced world around, one heart at a time.'

We may have begun contacting people intentionally more regularly, writing or emailing more regularly. With our families we may have sat a little more regularly. We may have offered practical assistance to others and listened to their fears and hopes at this time. Have we listened to them a little more intentionally and responded so that they know we are hearing them and sharing life with them. We may have re-learned how important bonds of love and friendship are, what 'community' really means and what its obligations are. Will we resolve to continue in the 'new' way?

At these points we are asked to turn, not so much away from ourselves but beyond ourselves. We re-orientate our lives; and this means, John Main says, "not rejecting ourselves but finding our marvelous potential as we come into full harmony with God. This awareness of potential is the positive basis of Christianity, and so, for a Christian, the central concern is not self, nor is it sin. The central reality is God, and love and, as far as we are concerned, growth in God's love. It is that mystery to which John points us; a mystery now unfolded by the generous gift of Christ our Lord.

That is the greatness of John the Baptist. It can be our greatness too.