

Notes for a homily on St. John Baptist, Advent 3 (17 December 2023), Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton, by Bishop Tery Brown. Text: John 1: 6-8, 19-28.

St. John the Baptist is one of my favourite New Testament characters and there is much to be learned from him.

He had a very interesting vocation – NOT to be the star of the show, NOT to be the first, but rather to be the second, pointing to another, the real star, his cousin, the Messiah, Jesus.

We live in a competitive society, even in the church, and we naturally want to be first: if we are a church leader, the best preacher, the best pastor, the best church planter, or biblical scholar, or whatever. Or as lay persons, the best at our job, or the best cook or the best knitter or even the best parent or grandparent.

Behind this striving to be first or best (and it is somewhat biblical – Paul talks about living the Christian life as a race – though not a competitive one) is sometimes a lot of ego or pride or desire for recognition. In the worst case scenario, our desire to be first can make us into a “control freak”.

But John the Baptist's vocation and ministry reminds us that we do not have to be first, as long as our lives point other to the Christ. For John, that was proclaiming the Christ and practising a baptism of repentance.

For us, living after the time of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, exercising our various gifts to express and encourage Christlike love, we help build the Reign of God in Christ that John the Baptist proclaimed. But those gifts are not ours personally – something that makes us “first” and powerful – but are gifts for the church. Through our ministries and love, through the power of the Holy Spirit, those gifts may and will take off in others – and we rejoice, not jealous, or seeing ourselves displaced – saying with John, I must decrease, so that another may increase.

Thus, John the Baptist may be regarded as the patron saint of missionaries and those who nurture new Christians. “I must decrease so that another may increase.” It was the message of the great missionary prophet of the early 20th century, Roland Allen, who argued that St. Paul was not so much a church planter as one who tended churches that grew up spontaneously, and then left them to grow, returning occasionally or writing letters. Likewise, a good missionary has to put himself or herself out of a job, so that new Christians may flourish in their own ways. (I suppose that is why I have retired to Canada and not Solomon Islands.)

If we are old and retired, we may regret we are no longer “in charge” or “first” just by virtue of our declining powers, mental or physical. Rather, we should see ourselves as positively

participating in the ministry of John the Baptist – helping, guiding, praying, etc., -- yet no longer “first” and powerful.

If we are younger, we are called to reflect upon how much our various ministries – whether as clergy or laity – are exercised in a way that puts us first in some sort of competitive way – wrongly thinking that these are *my* gifts or charisms – and remind ourselves that we are never ultimately front and centre – but that our lives are always to point to something beyond ourselves – to Christ and Christ’s all-embracing love.

John the Baptist let go – he let go of personal ambition, he let go of power, he let go of being first and he ultimately let go of his life – all for the sake of another: Jesus Christ and his incoming Reign of Love. He decreased so that ultimately the Church might grow and flourish. He calls us to reflect on our own delicate balance of power and the call to give up power, so that others may flourish. That should not be a sad, regretful process, but one of Joy – our Advent theme this week – for we are doing it for Christ.

All this ministry is also presented to God in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. As St. Augustine teaches, our lives are presented to God in the bread and wine on the altar. That link of our daily lives with the sacrament also makes it clear that Christ – rather than our personal ministries, as important as they are – comes first and sanctifies these ministries and offers grace to make them effective. John could only offer repentance. Christ offers new life and grace in the Holy Spirit. Amen.