



He must increase...

By Deacon Sam French

This week, on the Second Sunday of Advent, the lectionary jumps back to the opening verses of Mark's Gospel, where we are introduced to Saint John the Baptist. Since I was a child, I've had a particular love for this ragged desert dwelling cousin of Jesus; I even chose him as my confirmation saint. While, I suppose, sainthood is not a competition, not too many among the 'Church Triumphant' can claim to have been called the "greatest among those born of women (Mt 11:11)" by Christ himself. So, if my bias towards John is a little obvious, I can safely say: Jesus started it.

I grew up as a parishioner of Saint John the Baptist Catholic Church in Woy Woy and attended the parish primary school by the same name. I had the benefit of inspirational stories about John the Baptist's poverty, courage, and holiness drilled into my consciousness from day one of Kindergarten. I distinctly remember shouting the lyrics: "Fill every valley up, tear every mountain down, prepare the way of the Lord"¹ in Miss Culmer's Year 2 class, and being taught that we can be more like John the Baptist if we prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts by being *much* quieter.

Saint John the Baptist is often called the "Forerunner of Christ" for obvious reasons, but this was truly the case in my own spiritual journey. I remember realising how important Jesus must be, if the guy my church and school was named after was "not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals." This was an early glimpse at the divinity of Christ and the humility of Saint John.

Saint John's humility is again captured perfectly in his quote about Jesus, the Bridegroom: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). This has long been one of my favourite scripture passages, but it has taken on a new significance in light of my recent Ordination to the Diaconate. Even with only a few weeks of ministry under my belt, I've begun to see with clearer eyes the nature of my vocation. In order to *increase* Christ through my preaching and sacramental ministry, I must *decrease* by submitting my will to his. I'm discovering that the spirit of diaconal service is, in some sense, a zero-sum game – it's either my will or his, I can't have both.

The poverty of John's camel cloak and locust lunch make more sense to me now. The more I seek distractions or comforts superfluous to my vocation, the more my ministry suffers. As each week passes, I'm finding new habits – in thought and action – that need pruning to make room for Jesus to work better through me. For example, I learned that a prayerful, well thought-out homily can't coexist with a Netflix binge. Fortunately for me, John also proclaims "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin" (Mk 1:4).

Advent is a time of particularly focused spiritual preparation. I would encourage anyone reading this, regardless of your vocation, to take some time to reflect on the example of Saint John the Baptist, and ask his intercession to prepare the way of the Lord in your heart in these weeks leading up to Christmas.

In Christ,

Deacon Sam

¹ *Fill Every Valley*, Michael Mangan.