

## Reflection for Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021

### The gradual lengthening of the sunlight hours during January recalls St. John the Baptist's message to all of us.

It's interesting to think about the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. The Gospels tell us that John was Jesus' relative and that their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth were close. But we don't know much about the relationship between them.

Did they grow up together? Were they good friends besides being relatives? Since their mothers lived in different places (at least at the start of the Gospel of Luke), it seems likely that they went for a long time without seeing each other. Did they ever meet each other face to face before John baptized Jesus? We don't know.

What we do know of John, however, gives us much to reflect on and imitate. One comment he made has actually shaped our liturgical calendar and seems to summarize the vocation we're called to as Christians. 'He must increase; I must decrease.'

The gospels make clear John the Baptist's role as the last prophet, the last in a long line of holy men foretelling the coming of the Messiah. In St. John's gospel he writes, 'After this, Jesus and his disciples went into the region of Judea, where he spent some time with them baptising. So they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptising and everyone is coming to him." John said, "No one can receive anything except what has been given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said I am not the Messiah, but that I was sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens to him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease.'" (John 3:22-30)

**“He must increase; I must decrease.”** These words seem to condense into a simple phrase the transformation that should happen in the soul of a Christian. As we grow in the knowledge and love of Christ we should notice that we become more like him as we try to conform our lives to him. Our spiritual life should help us to know the will of God for our lives and provide us with the grace we need to carry it out.

**Whatever of Christ that is in us must increase:** Peacemaking, humility, meekness, prayerfulness, charity, and forgiveness must grow in us. **Whatever is in us that is not of Christ must decrease:** Selfishness, immorality, anger and pride must be pushed out.

The Church has woven this statement of St. John the Baptist’s into the structure of the liturgical year. His feast day falls on June 24, opposite from Christmas on the calendar. Just as Christmas falls near the winter solstice, St. John’s feast falls near the summer solstice. **That means that the days grow shorter after his feast: “I must decrease.”** This beautiful design helps us remember his wise words, and strive to imitate them in our own lives.

Traditionally, St. John the Baptist’s feast day was celebrated to the extent of being like a smaller Christmas, with bonfires, feasting, and processions. It is celebrated as a solemnity today.

We are now in the part of the year when the days are getting a little longer, bit by bit: “He must increase.” Many theologians and saints have used the sun and its light as a metaphor for Christ and his grace. This month of January, as sunset gets a little later every day, can lead us to seek a comparable growth of the light of Christ within us. The days getting longer seem like a physical reminder of the grace of Christ growing in our souls.

In the dark days of winter, we look forward to springtime with its promise of new life and beauty. This anticipation is a pale imitation of our eagerness for Christ, and the hope He brings us. As the days get longer, and we await spring, we can call to mind the part we are called to play in the “new springtime” of our renewed faith in Christ and Christianity.

Although we don't know the full details of St. John the Baptist's relationship with Jesus, we do know the most important thing about them: John told his disciples to follow Jesus. He wanted Christ's ministry to eclipse his own.

He is still sharing that message with us today, as these lengthening January days remind us. It's our choice whether or not we listen.

Deacon Kevin

(Adapted from an article by Theresa Barber in Aleteia.org)