

Readings: *Isaiah 61: 1,2,10 – 11; Canticle: The Magnificat; 1Thessalonians 5:16 – 24;*
John 1: 6 – 8, 19 – 28.

The Advent Liturgy is full of references to John the Baptist – and they may be roughly divided into two kinds. These two kinds are, perhaps, best illustrated by what Jesus has to say about John later in the Gospel: *Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he* [Matthew 11:11].

The Church sets before us some pictures which stress the importance of John: He is the last of the prophets, the immediate forerunner of Jesus, who even suggests he may be recognized as the great Elijah, returned to prepare the way [see Matthew 17: 10 – 13]. But we also find passages which emphasise John's inferiority – for example, his own words: *He must increase, but I must decrease* [John 3: 30]. It's possible that these contrasting pictures of John reflect disputes between his followers and the disciples of Jesus – during their lifetimes and long after. But in today's Gospel there is a pointer towards a deeper understanding.

What is important about John is that he preaches the need for our conversion – a better translation than 'repentance', because the basic meaning of the Greek word is 'a change of mind'. And a change of this sort – a turning round – is the essential preliminary to the new way of life of which the Gospel speaks, and to which we are all called. But there is something more to be achieved – a personal attachment to Jesus as the incarnate Word and Son of God.

The first part of today's Gospel Reading makes that point using the image of light. On Christmas Day we shall hear from the Gospel of John: *The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world.* That light was Jesus, as he himself was to say. John the Baptist, as we hear today, *was not that light, but a witness to speak for the light.*

The contrast between John and Jesus is the contrast between someone talking to us about a light that is coming and the light itself, bursting into our lives, and revealing a new truth, a new world. We await the celebration of that True Light at Christmas – meanwhile our task for the rest of Advent is to hear the voice of John recalling us to a change of mind and heart.