

He Must Become Greater, I Must Become Less

John the Baptist was creating quite a storm in the Judean wilderness, people were travelling from all over the country to listen to the preaching of John and to receive baptism, they were turning away from their sin and turning to God. He had become something of a cult figure and even hundreds of years after his death there were still groups of people dedicated to following John the Baptist.

But John knew his place. He knew that he was not the main thing but rather the warm up act. The show was not about John for someone greater was coming onto the stage.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Love is not self-seeking" and John the Baptist is a great example of someone, not out for their own ends. He was not there to be adored or worshipped. He knew his position and his place in life. John was simply a signpost, pointing people to someone greater. He said, "The one who comes from Heaven is above all...The father has loved the son and has placed everything in his hands."

This passage demonstrates to us the grace and humility of John.

Yes, he was willing to stand on the shoulders of giants...but he was quick to acknowledge that Jesus was the real thing.

People were now leaving John to follow Jesus. John's disciples naturally were concerned that their master was losing his crown. Crowds were flocking to hear Jesus. John's disciples said, "Everyone is going to him!"

There is a story told of an old preacher, who had become very popular, and crowds had gathered to hear him each Sunday, but his congregation began to dwindle, and this partly was because a young enthusiastic preacher had arrived in the church just down the road. One Sunday as the older preacher looked out at his dwindling congregation, he stopped and said, *where are the people*, and his faithful followers said, *they are down the road in the church with the new young minister*, and with that the old preacher, closed his Bible, and said "Let us go and join them also, for that is where is God is working".

I think that it is something in that spirit that John the Baptist declares to his disciples, *friends, let us go down the river and listen to Jesus. I must decrease for he must increase.*

John told his disciples that he was the minor part.

What a lesson for us as Christians, not to think too highly of ourselves. Everything that we have achieved can in the words of Isaac Newton, come from “standing on the shoulders of giants!”

John's spirit would save a lot of heartbreak in our world. If we knew our position in life. There are certain things that are not for us, and that we should focus on the work that God has given for us, and not be envious of anyone who has another position.

Selfishness can be fatal.

In the book of James, he writes, “Whenever people are jealous or selfish, they cause trouble and do all sorts of evil things.” 3v16

Paul writes to the Philippians, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interest of others.” 2v3-4

When someone does an unselfish act, it really makes your day, doesn't it! When someone puts you first, it makes you feel important and lifts you up!

That's what John was doing with Jesus, he was lifting Jesus up. He was putting Jesus on his shoulders; he was passing the baton and Jesus was to run the important final lap.

We are all challenged in putting others first – Richard Dawkins called it the selfish gene. The Bible calls it sin, and it tells us that it is something we are born with. According to Dawkins in our DNA we have a selfish gene, and that selfish gene is perhaps there for our survival. That is an instinct within us that wants to survive; a strength yes, but it can become a weakness; when we use it to walk over others, to throw our weight about; to put ourselves first.

Max is our Golden Labrador, it's actually Eva and Abbie's dog but in all truth, it is shared amongst the family – He is a beautiful big boy, strong and loves to run up the Campsies. But he has got an appetite, boy, he loves his grub.

Recently, when out walking with him, we met two ladies, who fell in love with Max, they said, *does he like his food?* Like his food? He's always hungry! *Well, she said, that's because labradors have a genetic mutation, they are hungry all the time because of a genetic issue* – that explains a lot!

John the Baptist shows us another way to deal with our selfish gene; he has been preaching and telling people to turn away from their selfishness and greed and so when he is put to the test, with the new preacher in town, he relinquishes his position and says, "I must decrease and he must increase".

So, can we get the little self out of our eyes? What's the cure for selfishness?

Simple...get yourself out of your eye by getting your eye off yourself. Quit staring at that little self, and focus on your great Saviour.

One Episcopalian priest explained why he makes the sign of the cross when he closes his prayers. He said, "The touching of my forehead and chest makes a capital I, then the other cuts the I in half!"

Isn't that the work of the cross? A smaller I and a greater Christ.

I wonder how much John the Baptist knew about Jesus going to the cross?

When he was decreasing, he was making the way for the road to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man would die for the sin for the world, and in the words of the old hymn:

*There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin,
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in.*

When we understand what it cost Jesus to die on that cross, to take our sin, our selfishness, our enmity towards God, then it cuts deep into our lives and we realise that he has made it possible for us to live lives that are all about him; for when we commit to his cross, we receive his spirit into our lives, a spirit that is not about self-seeking, a spirit that seeks the welfare of others even before our own.

John called Jesus the Bridegroom and he called himself the Friend of the Bridegroom.

The Friend of the Bridegroom in a Jewish wedding had an important role to play. He arranged the wedding; he sent out invitations; he presided at the wedding feast; he brought the bride and bridegroom together; and he had a special duty and that was to guard the bridal chamber and let no false lover in. He would open the door only when he heard the bridegroom's voice. When he heard the voice, he was overjoyed and his tasks were finished, and

the lovers were together and when that task was done, he willingly slipped out of the scene.

Yes, John was the Friend of the Bridegroom, John's task was to bring Israel and Jesus together, Jesus was the bridegroom and Israel the bride and so Jesus becomes the bridegroom of his church.

Willie Barclay tells the story of a respected professor of a past century. He was known not just for his success, but the way he handled it. On one occasion he stepped to a seat on a platform, the public noticed who he was and began to applaud – shocked, he turned and he asked the man behind him to go ahead. He then began to applaud the man, assuming the applause was for the other man, and he was quite willing to share in it.

The humble heart honours others.

Is Jesus not our best example of humility?

He was content to be known as the carpenter.

Happy to be mistaken for the gardener.

And delighted to serve his followers by washing their feet.

He serves us by doing the same.

If Jesus is willing to serve us, can we not do the same for others.

Can we make people a priority?

Can we accept our part in his plan?

Can we be quick to share the applause?

Can we regard others as more important than ourselves?

When we do, people will see Jesus in us. For it is in moments like these, that we decrease and he increases.

There was a soldier, who was dying in a hospital during the Crimean War and a young nurse was passing him by. She paused over the bed of the badly wounded soldier, and as she looked down, the young lad said to her, "You're Christ to me." In that moment, in his deepest need, Jesus drew near, he drew near through his servant Florence Nightingale, who unselfishly gave her life for others, in that war torn country.

So, as we leave Church today, whose life can we touch? Who can we share the love of Jesus with? Who can we lift up and bring to Jesus in our prayers? For when we do, we are living the life of the cross of Jesus, the I is being cut and the cross is being seen.

Amen.