



**Third Sunday of Advent (Year A)
Simbang Gabi Mass**

Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

**Sunday 18 December, 2022
Notre Dame Church, Cloverdale Parish, Perth**

As we reflect on the readings for tonight's Mass, the first Mass of our Christmas novena, the Church invites us to continue to focus our attention on St John the Baptist.

In the first few weeks of Advent, John the Baptist emerges as one of the two great figures of our Advent journey. The other, of course, is Mary and in the days which follow the gospel readings will focus increasingly on the mystery of the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary and on Mary's remarkable response of faith and courage.

When we consider the story of John the Baptist, one of the main features which emerges is his humility. Speaking about Jesus, John said to the crowds, "*The one who comes after me is greater than me, and I am not fit even to carry his sandals.*" He also said, again speaking about Jesus, "*He must grow greater, and I must grow smaller.*" John understood very clearly his role in the unfolding story of God's salvation of his people. He did not, to use a common expression, have tickets on himself. He realised that he was called to put himself at the service of something greater.

There is something here for each of us to reflect on. As Christians we know that we like John the Baptist are called to put ourselves at the service of something greater and this will always mean that we are called to look beyond ourselves to the needs of others. This is captured very clearly in tonight's first reading where we are encouraged to have a care for justice, to act with integrity, and to be open and welcoming to all those who come to us, looking for a generous and large-hearted response.

The Christian virtue of humility is really about recognising that we are not the centre of the universe, and that not everything has to revolve around what we want. Rather, we are called to be at the service of others, treating them with the respect and dignity which is their right as children of our father in heaven. And if this applies to everyone we meet, how much more does it apply to those closest to us - our husband or wife, our children or our parents, our friends, and our fellow brothers and sisters in the community of the Church.



Tonight's gospel, then, does direct us to the figure of John the Baptist but it also brings the focus on the role of this great Saint to an end. After tonight's Mass the Church will encourage us to turn more immediately to the mystery of God's coming among us in the person of his son, Jesus Christ. The Gospel for the second Mass of our novena tomorrow will be the Gospel which traces the origins of Jesus from Abraham to Mary and to Joseph. As Jesus himself says in tonight's Gospel, "*My testimony is greater than John's: the works my father has given me to carry out - these same works of mine testify that the Father has sent me.*" By tracing the origins of Jesus right back to Abraham, the Gospel wants to show us that Jesus really is the final fulfilment of all God's promises to his people.

There is something here too for all of us to reflect on. We are people of faith who have been called into the Church by God's generosity and love. When we gather for Mass each Sunday, one of the things we always do together is to recite the Creed which begins, "*I believe in God, the Father Almighty*" To believe, in our Christian understanding, really means to trust. For us to say that we *believe* in God is for us to say that we *trust* God. And for us to say that we trust God is to say that we have confidence that God will be faithful to his promises.

Sometimes, to live this trusting faith is not easy. Life can present us with many challenges and many difficulties. Some of these come from others and some come from somewhere deep within us. Often, we find ourselves drawn to things that we know are not really in harmony with what God is asking of us. We want to be faithful to God, but we know how easy it is to fall into infidelity. We want to believe that God can bring good out of the painful and tragic things that happen to us but sometimes we give in to doubt or despair.

It is in moments like this that we can turn to the second great Advent figure who will make her first appearance in our novena in tomorrow's gospel. Mary certainly knew what doubt and suffering were like. From the moment the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to tell her that she was to be the mother of the Messiah to the moment when she stood at the foot of the Cross as her son was brutally executed, Mary's life was marked by sadness and suffering. This is why she is sometimes called the *Mother of Sorrows*.

Her sufferings, however, did not lead her to despair because she had heard and believed the words the angel spoke to her at the Annunciation. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you," the angel told her, "and the power of the most high God will cover you with its shadow." It was Mary's unwavering belief in the presence of God's Spirit and the power of God's grace at work in her which enabled her to remain faithful, and Mary, if we ask her, will help us to deepen our faith and our trust, so that we, too, can remain faithful.

Humility and trusting faith, these are the two qualities which this first Mass of our Christmas novena invites us to reflect on as we begin this last stage of our Advent journey. May both the example and the prayers of Saint John the Baptist and of Mary, the mother of the Lord, support us and accompany us as we journey towards Christmas.