



Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

HOMILY

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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"Look, there is the Lamb of God".

With these words from this morning's Gospel, John the Baptist fulfills his vocation which, as we heard during the Advent season, was to prepare a Way for the Lord, to lead people to the Messiah and, in those famous words of the Baptist, to *"grow smaller so that he, Jesus, might grow greater"*.

In one sense, the result of John's declaration that Jesus was the Lamb of God was disastrous for him. After all, as this morning's gospel tells us, John's disciples immediately abandoned him and went to Jesus who invited them to "come and see" not just where he lived but what he was all about. We are told that these men stayed with Jesus for the rest of the day and, as we know, became part of that group of twelve apostles who would become so important in the life and ministry of Jesus, eventually becoming the foundation stones of the Church.

What might look like a disaster for John – his abandonment by his followers - was of course the very opposite, and John knew it. All through his preaching he had insisted that he himself was not the messiah, and that the one to come after him, the one whose coming John awaited with anticipation, was so great that John was not even worthy to untie the strap of his sandals.

As we reflect on all this we can recognise in John three qualities which it might not be so easy to recognise in ourselves. One is true self-knowledge, one is humility and one is the inner freedom which comes with the victory over possessiveness. At the start of a new year perhaps these are three qualities which we might try to develop in ourselves, or, perhaps it is better to say, ask the Lord to develop within us.

Whenever I think about self-knowledge I am reminded of a story about St Francis of Assisi. He is said to have spent whole nights in prayer, saying over and over again, *"Lord, who are you and who am I?"* As a young man St Francis experienced a powerful moment of conversion and one of the results of that experience was that he began to understand himself not in terms of his own gifts and talents, or his own wealth and power, but rather in the light of what the Scriptures, and the Church and his own heart were all telling him about God. That is why, to the question *"Lord, who am I?"* he added the question *"Lord who are you?"* St Francis had come to realise that any of us will only really understand ourselves when we acknowledge that all that we are, and all that we have, comes a gift to us from God, and that our lives will only make sense when they are lived as God intended us to live them.



In a sense, this quality of self-knowledge is connected very closely with another quality of John the Baptist, that of humility. Humble people are not those who are always down on themselves. Rather humble people are those who are able to see themselves as precious gifts of God who are called, like Mary the Mother of Jesus, to listen carefully to God speaking in their hearts calling them to put their trust not in themselves but in Him. *"Here I am, the servant of the Lord,"* said Mary at the Annunciation. *"Let God's will be done in my life"*. Because Mary was not ashamed, but rather was eager, to be the Lord's servant, Jesus came into our world bringing with him the gift of life for all. Humility and openness bring new life: pride and rigidity only bring suffering and ultimately spiritual death.

Freedom from possessiveness was the third quality John the Baptist showed when he let his disciples go so that they could follow Jesus. He did not cling to the influence he had over them, nor to their loyalty to him. He knew how to set them free so that they could respond to the invitation the Lord was holding out to them. Because of his own inner freedom and lack of possessiveness, John could make it possible for those he cared about to follow their hearts and the urging of the Holy Spirit at work in them. In this, John the Baptist is reminding us that grasping on selfishly to things, or to people, in our own lives will actually diminish our lives and the lives of those we love.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus announced that, among other things, he had been sent by his Father to proclaim freedom to those in prison, freedom to captives. Today, the Gospel invites us to reflect on the kinds of prisons in which we often find ourselves: the prisons of possessiveness, of pride, of self-delusion and self-importance. Jesus wants to, and can, release us from these prisons. Just as he said to these disciples whom John the Baptist set free to follow him, so Jesus says to us: *come to me, stay with me, learn from me, and follow me*. This of course is what we do every time we gather together to celebrate the Eucharist. As we set out on a new year together as the community of the disciples of Jesus here in Perth, this is the program the Lord sets before us. So let us take to heart John the Baptist's words about Jesus: *Look there is the Lamb of God – go to him, follow him and let him give you life*.