



**Friday Week Two of Advent  
Simbang Gabi**

**Homily**

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Archbishop of Perth**

**Friday 15 December 2024  
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

As we begin our Christmas novena tonight, the Church's liturgy invites us to turn our eyes to three people who, each in their own way, offer us something very special about what it means for us both to live these days of preparation for the birth of Jesus, but even more importantly to live, not just on Christmas Day but on every day, as a true disciple of Jesus.

The three people, of course, are John the Baptist, Saint Joseph, and Mary.

In tonight's Mass, both the first reading and the gospel invite us to focus our attention on St John the Baptist.

In the gospel, Jesus reflects on one of the traditions of the Jewish faith, which taught that in one way or another, the prophet Elijah, one of the greatest prophets of the old Testament, would return again in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Some people took this idea literally and thought that Elijah himself would come back on his fiery chariot. Jesus understands it in a different way. For him the spirit of Elijah - the passion, the commitment and the courage of Elijah - would also be in the man who was to prepare for the way of the Lord: and that man was John the Baptist.

Tonight's first reading, then, is providing us simply with an opportunity to recall the figure of Elijah. The words of Jesus in our gospel reading help us to understand just how significant John the Baptist is, for Jesus proclaims John to be as important in Jesus's time as indeed, more important than Elijah was so many centuries before.

I just want to mention three things about John the Baptist this evening that might help us as we enter into our Christmas novena and prepare for the celebration of Christmas Day.

Firstly, I would like to recall the prophecy about John the Baptist made by his father Zachariah at the time of John's birth. *"You, my child,"* he says, *"will be called a prophet of God, the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way for him. You will make their salvation known to God's people through the forgiveness of all their sins, and the loving kindness of the heart of our*



*God, who visits us like the dawn from on high*". In this prophecy Zechariah is saying something important about all the great saints of our Christian tradition from the time of John the Baptist right up to the saints of our present day. Their role is not to gather followers for themselves. Their role is to help people turn to the Lord. This is the task of all the saints, because it is the task of every Christian person, and they are saints precisely because they fulfilled this task so well. But the task belongs to all of us in our own context. We are called to help other people turn to the Lord - husbands and wives are called to help each other do this; parents are called to help their children to do this; brothers and sisters are called to help each other do this, and in fact we are all called to help other people come to the Lord Jesus.

As John the Baptist grew up, this became the driving force of everything he did. Many people came to him and admired him because they could see that he was a man of God, but he always insisted they must look not to him, but to the one who would follow him - to Jesus. He once said about Jesus, "The one who is coming after me is greater than me, and I am not even worthy to undo the strap of his sandals". This is the second point, the second lesson, we can learn from John the Baptist, and of course it is very similar to the first point. We must never put ourselves at the centre in relation to our Christian life and the different ways in which we exercise our Christian mission. Whether it is the bishop or the parish priest, the parish secretary or the members of the Parish Council, the people who come regularly to Mass each Sunday or anybody else who is a member of a Christian community, faith must be never about putting ourselves first or making ourselves the centre of everything. Our Christian faith must always be about Jesus at the heart of all that we say and do.

On another occasion, John the Baptist made a very similar point and this is the third thing I want to share with you tonight. Just in case people were tempted to give John the Baptist too much importance he once said of Jesus, "He must grow greater in your lives and I must grow smaller in your lives". Another way of saying this, perhaps, is that as Christians we are meant to be signs and bearers of the love of the Lord Jesus for his people. We must always be leading people to him, not to ourselves.

All of this, of course, is really an invitation to us from the Lord to become very humble people, particularly in our families and in our engagement with our Catholic Church communities. There is always a temptation for us to put ourselves in the centre. as we spend these days of the novena, praying together and doing our best to open our hearts and our lies to the Lord so that we can celebrate his birth on Christmas day with great joy, perhaps we could ask him for this special grace of Christian humility. It is a grace which will help us to put the Lord Jesus at the heart of our lives and, of course, to do that we have to step aside from the centre ourselves and make room for him.



Tonight, then, we ask St John the Baptist, and we also ask Saint Joseph and Mary, to pray for us that like them, we can be faithful and joyful disciples of Jesus.