

*Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Every year *Time* magazine names someone as the Man or Woman of the Year. The qualifications for this honour are simply that the particular individual has had a dramatic impact upon humanity or world history in the past year. Over the years such respected individuals as Albert Einstein, the Dalai Lama, Queen Elizabeth and a whole host of US presidents have been given this honour. But there have also been some individuals who are better known by their notoriety, such as Adolph Hitler or the Ayatollah Khomeini. Some of these people, we might all agree, have been great men and women; others we would see as the greatest shame or bane of humanity.

If you had the opportunity to name someone as the greatest Canadian who ever lived, who would you choose? Would it be someone in the political realm, such as John A. MacDonald, John Diefenbaker or Pierre Trudeau? Would you choose a great scientist or humanitarian such as Sir Frederick Banting or Dr. Charles Drake? Maybe you would think of someone who had made a really important contribution to Canada and its cultural heritage, like hockey players Paul Henderson or Wayne Gretzky.

What if we were to choose the person who was the greatest living individual of the past millennium? Would we think of someone like Winston Churchill or Madame Curie? Would it be Martin Luther or Martin Luther King Jr.? What, or more precisely, who we think of as great is likely going to be strongly influenced by our experience, our own interests or knowledge, and our beliefs.

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, the Nobel prize committee once again honoured people with various awards of merit granted each year. Great scientists, writers, and humanitarians were among those who received rather sizeable cash awards in their fields. These are individuals who likely will not be house-hold names the way people like Taylor Swift or Santa Claus are. But when their work is examined, they are people that we recognize as great thinkers, leaders and humanitarians.

In his play, *Twelfth Night*, William Shakespeare has a character say, “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them”. I remember discussing the whole idea of the “great man” in history class—what constitutes greatness, and whether or not it is the individual or the situation that makes a person go down in history as great. But how would we rank ourselves, especially in comparison to some of the greatest names in history? Have you made a valuable medical discovery that has benefited mankind? Have you done something astounding for the cause of world peace? Have you been an inspiration to a whole generation of individuals? I doubt that there are many of us who see ourselves as great people. We’re just Bob, or just Dave, or just Mary. We may not have done anything that is outright shameful, but we haven’t really done anything worthy of praise or recognition, either.

In our text today, Jesus calls John the Baptist the greatest of those born to women, the greatest man who ever lived. But Jesus also says that as great as John was, he is nothing compared to even the least of those in the kingdom of heaven. And while we don’t want to let it go to our heads, we can, and should rejoice in the wonderful grace that our God has given to us, that we, by faith in the Messiah who comes to save us, are members in His kingdom, promoted from dying, condemned sinners into the heirs of heaven--great people of a great and wonderful God.

***Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.*** That is high praise, especially when it comes from Jesus Himself. John the Baptist is called the greatest of all mankind. He did not make any great medical or scientific discoveries. He did not broker any great peace accords. He was never wealthy nor successful, at least from a human point of view. So what was it that made John so great?

We could say that John was a great man because of his integrity. At the time of our text, John is in prison, because he dared to speak out against King Herod after Herod divorced his wife in order to marry his niece, who was already married to his brother. John would speak the truth, even if it meant his own life.

Or perhaps we could point to the fact that John was great because he was not caught up in the materialism of the world. His

ascetic lifestyle showed him to be a man not influenced by the world or the things of the world. We are told: ***Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.*** (Matthew 3:4 - ESV) In part, this is why the people came to listen to John in the wilderness. He was different from their teachers, reminding the people of the prophets of old. John was a simple man who spoke with a simple authority and with a conviction many had not seen before.

But as wonderful as these things may be, they aren't the things that made John great. Rather, it was John's call that made him great. It was the position that God had bestowed upon John that made the difference. John was blessed by God in being given the responsibility of being the messenger sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. While all the other prophets would speak of the coming Messiah, it was John who could actually point at Jesus and say: ***"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*** (John 1:29 - ESV) God had an important task for John, a task which the Holy Spirit enabled John to fulfill faithfully and effectively. Just as the Father spoke from heaven at the Baptism of Jesus to say, ***"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*** (Matthew 3:17 - ESV), so Jesus' testimony about John shows that God is pleased with all that John has done as the one who prepared the way for the coming of the Saviour.

Yes, John the Baptist, the way-preparer for the Messiah, was great. But Jesus tells us that even the least member of the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. This greatness is not based on intellectual ability or on athletic skill. It is not based on the things we accomplish or the money we have. It is not the result of our social status or of some position we hold. It definitely does not come because we have lived a holy, sinless life worthy of God's recognition. True greatness is not from us; rather, it comes to us through the grace and blessing we receive from the Saviour, who comes to ransom and redeem His people. It really is a wonderful miracle when you think about it: we, who have no right to lay any claim to greatness, especially before God Himself, can rejoice in the greatness we have through the mercy of God. Through Christ we have received a wonderful promotion, from dying sinner to redeemed saint. In Christ we are ransomed from a miserable existence as slaves of Satan so that God is pleased to call us His children. With Paul we have to admit: ***For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.*** (Romans 7:18 - ESV) Yet God Himself declares that He is not ashamed to be called our Father. Everything changes for us in the Saviour who comes. As one of the Christmas hymns says, ***"He undertakes a great exchange, Puts on our human frame, And in return gives us His realm, His glory, and His name.*** (LSB 389, st. 4)

There are many places in Scripture where we are warned against thinking too highly of ourselves. But it is also good for us to know and to remember our new position through the grace and mercy of Christ. We can claim greatness, not of ourselves, but through the Saviour who died and rose to make us great in His kingdom. We are special people, special to God. ***"You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you"*** (Isaiah 43:4 - ESV), the Lord declares. When we are feeling unloved, or unimportant, we can remember that we are great in the sight of God. When we start to question our own worth, when issues of self-esteem start to plague us, we can remember how great we are to God. When we feel that we aren't as smart as the next person or as attractive or as skilled, we can still remember that we are great as members of God's kingdom. But let us never forget that we are great, not because we are so wonderful in and of ourselves, but because we have a great and wonderful God who redeems us from sin, death and hell, by giving Himself for us on the cross, and who gives us new life as His beloved children through His Holy Spirit.

John was great. Even greater are those who, through faith, cling to the Saviour, who died and rose for them. That includes the children like those who were so dear to Jesus that ***"He took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them."*** (Mark 10:16, ESV) It includes the young people who trust in Him, even though so many of their friends and classmates have no room in their lives for God's truth. It includes those who serve in so many different ways in the church. It includes those who offer their prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, praising God for His goodness, and coming before Him with the needs of those around them. And then there are the secretaries and council members and pastors, deacons and missionaries. All these people, and many more like them are great in the sight of God, greater than John, for they are living in the joy of the life they have through the greatest One of all: the Saviour who comes for us and for our salvation. The world may not recognize that greatness, but that doesn't matter. We, who are nothing in and of ourselves have been promoted to greatness, a greatness even beyond that of John the Baptist, for in Christ we are the great people of a great God. Amen.