

HE MUST BECOME GREATER

(John 3.22-30)

Hello! We are almost there; 2 more sleeps and it will be Christmas. When the girls were younger, they used to say to me "46 days and it will be Christmas; 46, 45, 44 days..." You get the picture. I used to reply in my best Scrooge-like voice, "Yes, 47 days, and it will be over."

For children and even some adults, it's all about the day; presents, parties, shows and, yes, more food and drink than is good for them – or me.

For Christians: Advent and Christmas should be about preparing ourselves for the celebration of Jesus' first coming, as a baby. Advent is also a reminder to us as Christians that one day soon Jesus is returning to earth as he said he would.

Don't mishear me, there is nothing wrong with our celebrations, it's great fun and brings people together to rekindle their relationships with each other. But we spend a lot of time and money in getting everything ready for Christmas; how much time do we spend getting our lives ready for his second coming?

Are you ready if he comes today? Am I ready if he comes *now*? Not as a little baby, not even riding on a donkey (and there is no donkey mentioned in the nativity story as my former minister loved to remind everyone).

When Jesus comes again, he will be riding on his white horse, so big that everyone on earth will see him! It's a warrior horse fit for the King of kings and Lord of lords. Christ, the redeemer will be here - and here to stay too.

You don't get bigger than that. When I grew up in the 50s there was no publicity about worldwide events, you didn't hear of much unless it was in your own town. We took the weather as we found it, by looking out of

the window. Nowadays, you hear about the sale of a carpet in Timbuktoo!

It's great to know to know that when Jesus comes again, no one will know about it until he is here. Whether we like it or not – he will be great then but how about now? Is Jesus bigger than we are now, is he greater than our own lives, ambitions, egos? I don't know about you, but I often make my own things bigger than Jesus.

Let's look at our scripture readings for today. In Ephesians we read of God's marvellous plan for the Gentiles. Paul is telling us how he became a prisoner for us (Gentiles).

Even though he was a Jewish man from one of the top Jewish tribes, his upbringing was second to none but it was of no use to God, he was too big in himself and God needed to make him smaller. A place of grace where Paul surrendered his own life in exchange for the one God had ready for him.

Paul acknowledges who he is now and accepts his position. "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power". A prisoner to the gospel, ready to die for Jesus, so that we "Gentiles" could get in on the act.

We are included by what Jesus did for us and can read it for ourselves because of people like Paul.

In John's writings we hear about John the Baptist, now you couldn't get a more different guy from Paul? Could you?

You wouldn't think he needed to be brought down a peg or two, would you? Dressed in camel's hair and eating locusts and honey living out in the back of beyond. Even so people tried to trip him up. "Look Rabbi! That man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan, look he's got everyone going to him!"

Notice how they call him Rabbi; to try and flatter him into thinking he's more than he is. "What a great guy you are John, we all love you, but look over there (enviously) that other guy – well he's getting all the crowd on his side, Isn't he?"

John's reply, and it should be ours too if anyone should try to take away the glory from Jesus, is to quote Jesus himself. John 3.13; "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven - the Son of Man."

Jesus! Either he is the greatest, the Son of God, the word of God made flesh. Or he is a crackpot, some sort of illusionist, some kind of medieval magician. He is not in between.

Otherwise, we make him out to be just another prophet, another good man, great teacher. You can't be an illusionist as a baby, and no matter how great any man or woman has been, no one has ever been great first then arrived on earth as a helpless baby; small, vulnerable, needing everyone around him to help him live.

Before, during and after his earthly life he is the word of God. That alone makes him the greatest. He is the only Son of God, part of the three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Yet he entered our worldly dimension in total surrender and went all the way to his death and resurrection in complete obedience to every word his Father in heaven spoke to him.

John the Baptist was totally happy and satisfied to live out his days dressed in camel's hair and eating locusts and honey. Why? Because his focus was on the one who is greater. He said, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven, I am not the Messiah, but am sent ahead of him" – full of joy, life complete. "He must become greater, I must become less."

It doesn't mean we can't try to do well with our lives. We can and should accept praise when we do something well. It means we remember where

our gifts came from, who gave us our talents, who do we thank at the end of the day?

When I worked in the remand home in Middlesbrough, I used to thank God every night when I finished work that I was still in one piece! It's having grateful hearts in knowing that by God's grace our lives can be different. It's a choice we all make, I am so glad I made my choice.

I heard a story of a visiting preacher who, after the service, complimented the pianist on her playing. "Oh it wasn't me playing but the Lord you know!" "In that case," he said, "it was rubbish! I'd expect Jesus to play much better than that!"

It's not that kind of 'humility' that God expects from us; he is our Father, he made us and loves us. He wants the best for each and every one of us. God wants us all to receive the best present in the world, the presence of Jesus in our lives.

To have his presence in our lives - the Holy Spirit - we must make room for him. "He must become greater, I must become less."

Recently, Ann and I were out shopping; waiting in the aisle at the checkout. I asked the lady in front of us if she would move her one item along so we could begin to unload our trolley. "No" she replied in a loud voice (and without turning around), "there is a barrier in front of me; how do I know which way it will open?"

She was very hostile, I could easily have replied how rude she was behaving when I had only requested a small thing. But I let it pass as she carried on in a loud voice to one of the ladies on the till, "It's not the customer's job to open the barrier but it's the staff's job..."

Outside, we loaded up the car and as Ann took the trolley back to the shop another lady in the car next to ours was carrying two heavy bags to the recycling. She had left one behind, so I picked it up and followed her from behind. When she realised someone was helping her, she beamed

at me and put her hands together in prayer mode to say 'thank you. Aaaah, faith restored in humanity.'

The fact of the matter is that many people are struggling with life. At Christmas, those struggles get amplified. The expectations of family and friends; the parties, pantomimes, shopping, decorations, presents, food and drink. Not to mention gathering together on Christmas day with the whole family to celebrate...

The whole day? The celebrations can be wonderful, as I am sure yours are. Even so, there are lonely people at Christmas who need us to remember them in thoughts, prayers and deeds.

According to the Samaritans, 1 in 3 people think about suicide at Christmas - 1 in 3. Wow!

Remember as well that we have been waiting in Advent. Waiting and preparing for the coming of Christ. As a new-born baby first, but then as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

This preparation is not much use if it only lasts for Christmas time. Our role as the bride of Christ (his church) is to be ready for when he, the bridegroom comes.

Jesus will return, and we have known he will for 2,000 years, so his coming again must be sooner rather than later. Let's try and get ready for the one who will always be greater than any of us. It's an act of our Christian faith and guess what? We get invited to the biggest banquet in heaven, it will make our parties seem very small.

Two sleeps to go! Enjoy your festivities, have fun with your families, your friends, watch them as they open their presents with anticipation and wonder. Remind yourselves we will get to do that when Jesus comes again but this time forever and ever, an eternity of wonder.

In your celebrations, I trust you will remember those who are lonely, without homes to share, or those for whom Christmas is a painful time.

The greatest present we ever receive is eternal life through the sacrifice of the one person who is greater than anything or anyone we can imagine.

Jesus is no imagination, he is greater than us. Have a Merry Christmas. Let us pray.