

Sermon Advent 2 Year C 2021

Many of you will soon be hurtling head long - if you're not already - to preparations for Christmas. I think there are probably two kinds of people in the world: those who actually enjoy the work of preparing for Christmas; and those who simply grin and bear it, (or not bother at all and leave it all to others!). There are some people who like buying carefully thought-out gifts for each member of the family; people who devotedly write each year their Christmas cards; people who put careful thought into the menu. Some families still do gather and make an occasion of putting up the Christmas tree or setting up the Christmas Crib, or setting up the Christmas lights. Others enjoy the simple task of laying the table for Christmas lunch, choosing a cloth, putting out the napkins, the best china and glassware. Often it is the small touches - the unseen preparations - that *combined* make for a memorable celebration.

In this Advent season, alongside everything else we are doing (and need to be doing!), the church reminds us of the importance of *spiritual* preparation. Each year, the second and the third Sundays in Advent centre on the unsettling figure of John the Baptist. We are reminded that if *we* want to prepare properly for the coming of Jesus it would be good to listen and take notice of the Baptizer's message. Now, all four Evangelists - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - *all* realized the importance of John's message. All four of them wrote about John's preaching, while only two of them described the birth of Christ! So, even if John the Baptist doesn't easily fit into our picture of Christmas, and our preparations for Christmas, the church holds him up to us as an important figure, and an important voice to take notice of: *prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low, winding ways will be straightened and rough roads made smooth.*

The example and message of John the Baptist reveals an important religious truth: if we want to share life with God, then we need to make room for him. If we want to be real about faith, then we need to get rid of some of the clutter and distractions that can so fill up our lives.

If we want our hearts and lives to be shaped after the pattern of God's dream for us, then we need to do some levelling of mountains. If God is to be permitted to break into our lives, then some filling in of valleys and some making straight of crooked paths is needed. That's not easy work. That doesn't just happen. It takes serious commitment. But it *can* happen. One of the many messages that comes through to us in the Scriptures at this time is that God makes the impossible possible.

As we know from the biblical record, John proclaimed the coming of God's Kingdom and preached a baptism of repentance. His baptism simply symbolised the radical change needed if we are to participate in God's kingdom. It symbolised the washing away of an old life and committing to a new life. But John recognised that that could only happen with a desire for change. Preparing to share in the life of God's kingdom involved a radical turning around. John's baptism was not a proselyte baptism, not converting Gentiles into Jews. Instead, it was a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. And so his baptism was one of 'repentance'.

The Greek used here for 'repentance' is *metanoeo* and carries with it the idea of *turning around*. The idea precisely being that repentance requires of us to turn to a new direction. The prophet Isaiah gives John the programme of that necessary turning, of that radical change. Turning to face God's Kingdom will look like *every valley will be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low, winding ways will be straightened and rough roads made smooth*. This is a vision of a world turned upside down. In other words, John recognises that if we are serious about preparing to share in God's life, then the usual ways of operating, the usual ways of living, just won't do. We have to *turn away* from all those things so we can head in the right direction...

The magnitude of the holy and solemn task of making straight ways for the Lord is emphasised by the seemingly arbitrary list of names Luke proposes at the start of today's passage. But of course, there is nothing arbitrary in the gospels. And the list is of great significance. Luke's readers would have been aware that the reign of Tiberius was marked by his decline in mental health and the terror of his final years, including the expulsion of Jews from Rome.

Pilate was known for his ruthlessness, who held the Jews in low esteem, introducing tokens of emperor worship into the temple at Jerusalem and taking money from the temple treasury. Herod Antipas built his Hellenized capital, Tiberias, on a graveyard, which would be unclean for Jews. He placed images in public places, and was fiercely loyal to Rome. Philip reigned in a Gentile area, in which he accelerated Hellenization. And yet, into this context of power, threat, and instability, *'the word of the Lord'* comes to John.

Now, on the one hand this list of historical figures anchors the record of the gospel in a *particular time and place*. The heart of the gospel is faith in the Incarnation, that God has come among us in a particular time and in a particular place. But by ending with the quote from Isaiah - "*All flesh will see the salvation of God*" - Luke also stresses *the universal* aspect of God's salvation. Luke starts the section with a list of rulers who *did not* bring wholeness or salvation. But he ends with the word of hope in the God who visits and who *does* bring salvation. Now, we don't live in a perfect world. And we as people of faith we are wasting our time if look to this world to fulfill our deepest needs. Surely half our problems come because so often *we misdirect* our hopes. We look for salvation in all the wrong areas. As a starting point Luke reminds us, don't look to our civic or government leaders. They *are not* the ones who are worthy of our efforts to make crooked paths straight, or to make rough ways smooth. They, and any number of substitutes, will only disappoint if we turn and direct our lives toward them.

At Christmas we celebrate nothing less than the arrival of the king of the universe, the Lord of all. If we remember that, then perhaps that might help re-orient and re-prioritise some of our preparations at this time. A spiritual revolution would truly occur if our earnest preparations at this time was to clear away the debris of our hearts and lives with the same energy with which we buy presents and prepare lunch! We would, I am sure, find a changed world, a changed church, a changed parish if all of us turned toward the Lord in a spirit of repentance. Our Advent preparation is so we can turn around and face the Lord. We turn around so to greet him at his coming. May our preparations at this time take us in that direction. Amen.