

Preparing the way of the Lord by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 10th December 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, **Mark 1:1-8**

Introduction (before Gospel reading):

Questions for discussion in small groups:

- 1. How can we prepare spiritually for Christmas?*
- 2. How did God prepare for the birth of his Son?*

Listen to the Gospel reading and notice any words of phrases that stood out to you.

What struck you about the passage? Share with your neighbour.

One thing that struck me was the way Mark uses quotes from the prophets Malachi and Isaiah to explain the mission of John the Baptist.

The message of Isaiah:

This prophecy was given to tell the exiles from Judah who had been taken into captivity in Babylon that the punishment for the nation's disobedience had been served, and God was now coming to save his people. So if God is coming, there needs to be a straight, level road without obstructions. Nothing should get in the way of God's arrival.

Like other New Testament writers, Mark sees how words of prophecy, written centuries before, apply in a new situation. In the passage from Isaiah the hearers are called to prepare the way for the LORD – that is, God – to travel. Here John the Baptist is preparing the way for the Son of God, who is coming to save the world. So, in the same way, people need to clear the way for Jesus to come and save them.

Responding to the message

What does this mean in practice? John's message is not just in words but in action: people are given an invitation to be baptised as a symbol of being cleansed from their sins and given a fresh start with God. It's not enough just to hear a message from God. We need to respond in some way. Getting baptised was for John's hearers a practical step they could take to show that they wanted to put their lives in order and receive the forgiveness of God. Just as Isaiah proclaimed that God was offering forgiveness and a new start to his people Israel, so God was now making the same offer to the people who listened to John. And, of course, God is making the same offer to people today.

Clearing the way

I'd like to go back for a moment to the prophecy of Isaiah. The message there was that hills needed to be levelled off and valleys filled up. In our modern context I'm reminded of what it takes to build a motorway. The engineers who design motorways have several things in mind. I've not consulted one, but from driving on motorways and also seeing new ones being constructed, I think we can deduce certain objectives. The road is intended to make travel between two

places quicker, so it needs to take as direct a route as possible. It also needs to avoid too much of a gradient. So where hills and mountains stand in the way, a cutting is made, or even a tunnel through a mountain. Where a valley stands in the way, a viaduct will be constructed. None of these are easy tasks.

I wonder what are the obstructions that stand in the way of people receiving the salvation which God offers them through Jesus? This Christmas many people will come to church who don't usually attend services. And even those who don't come to church will hear the Christmas message through carols piped through the p.a. system of shops or shopping centres, or through carols sung at a school Christmas concert or even by carol singers at the Sandhurst Churches Together outreach or our street carol singing. Many parents will watch their small children taking part in a Nativity play. What do you think prevents them from responding to the message?

Let's take a moment to think about this.

What do you think are the obstacles that get in the way of people responding to the gospel message?

Some possible answers are:

- They've got so used to hearing the words and the story that they don't think about it any more, if they ever did.
- No one has ever explained to them what the carols and the story actually mean.
- They are too busy with all their practical preparations that they haven't time to think.

- They have had a bad experience of church or Christians, so they tune the message out.
- They think science has disproved Christianity.
- They think the story of Christ's birth is just another made-up story for children.
- Or maybe they do understand what it means to follow Jesus, but there's something about their lifestyle which they are not willing to change: maybe they realise that it could mean stopping doing something they know is a sin, or being more generous, or putting right a broken relationship. They are not willing to take the necessary step because they are not willing to let Jesus be Lord of their lives.

Obstacles in our attitudes

I've just been talking about people who have not yet decided to receive Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. But what about those who have? What about us: are we going to be free to celebrate Jesus' birthday in a way that is honouring to him?

As we prepare for Christmas, are we so obsessed with having the "perfect" Christmas, with all the decorations, presents, overflowing dinner table, etc, that we give far too little attention to worshipping the one who was born on earth so we could become children of God? Are we trying so hard to please other people that we forget to make pleasing God our priority? In this season of peace and goodwill, is there a relationship with someone that is strained or broken, and we've refused to forgive, or to ask for forgiveness?

In Matthew's gospel and in Luke's gospel, John the Baptist goes on to spell out practical things that he expects people to do to show that they really have turned away from sin and asked for a new start with God. If we really want to welcome Jesus this Christmas, what would that mean in practice? What are we inviting him into?

Now I know that we've all got things in our lives that need sorting out. God does not expect us to make ourselves perfect in order to be accepted (we can't anyway). As St John wrote, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it.¹ He also wrote that "if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness".²

So my challenge for all of us this morning is this: as we prepare for Christmas over the next two weeks, what will that mean for us spiritually? What obstacles are getting in the way of us welcoming Jesus?

John gave people a physical sign of their repentance: getting baptised. May I suggest that we each find some symbol that will remind us to put Christ at the centre of our Christmas this year? One simple suggestion would be to get a candle and light it every day, perhaps at breakfast, perhaps over your evening meal, and as you light it and watch it burn, say a prayer. Ask God what he is saying to you this Advent about what following Jesus seriously would mean for you.

¹ John 3:17

² 1 John 1:9

There are Advent candles available to buy at the back of the church, but any candle will do.

And as you watch your candle shed its light, ask God to show you who among your acquaintances and friends or family you could invite to hear the gospel message this Christmas. Whom could you bring along to a Christingle, Nativity or carol service? With whom could you share in a few simple words what Christmas means to you?

Let us pray.