



# *Second Sunday of Advent*

## *Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe*



Sunday 6 December 2020

### READINGS

Isaiah 40: 1-11; Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3: 8-15a; Mark 1: 1-8

## *Prepare the Way*

The beginning of December as you know, is the start of a new year in the church calendar and a new cycle in the lectionary readings where we now focus on Mark's gospel. The colours of the church change to purple as we mark the new season of Advent, a time of waiting, watching and preparing for the great event of the birth of Jesus. It is a time of anticipation and hope and all sorts of new beginnings.

The Gospel of Mark chapter 1 verse 1 has the opening words "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God..." So much for giving us any 'spoiler alert' for how this story unfolds. Then, it links us way back into the past, calling on the words of the prophet Isaiah: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

Mark's gospel skips right over any story of a baby in a manger, no shepherds or angels. Instead he introduces the somewhat wild and revolutionary figure of John the Baptist, saying this is the one the prophet was telling us about; this is the voice of the one in the wilderness. Mark shows us John to prepare us for the arrival of the adult Jesus, the hero of the tale, the one whom we are to follow.

Which brings us to today. The time of waiting. Our Advent time of hope and preparation. We know what comes next, but let's not rush ahead. Let us listen to the voice crying out in our own wilderness right now. How can we engage with the message of John the Baptist today?

PREPARE, he said. Make straight paths for the Lord. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and we read that the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by John in the Jordan River. What were all these people so ready to hear? It was John whose voice opened their ears and whose life and actions created the path on which people would meet the Messiah. Before they had even met Jesus, their hearts were filled with the hope of his coming.

Prepare. When we prepare for Christmas we exhaust ourselves with cleaning and planning and shopping and cooking and making. Even this year with fewer people and less money, the excitement tempts us and urges us and the anxiety can build up until it is so easy to find ourselves spending time, energy and money that we don't have.

That is not how we prepare best for the coming of Christ.

For John's followers, their greatest moment of change seems to come from their deepest sense of longing. John's voice in the wilderness echoed in the desert-like condition of their own hearts.

Living as he did, dressed in camel hair and eating locusts, John had been learning the way on the path that strips us of our attachment to getting and to having. He was freed of the need for MORE. He had been shedding himself of everything that could obstruct the path he had been called to prepare.

Through John's presence and his words, those who heard him then and those who will hear him today are able to recognise that the longing at the core of our human selves is for all that heals – for justice, for peace, for the joy and life of the Spirit. These are things we don't claim by getting, but rather by letting go. That's why it's often easier to find our path in the barren landscape of the desert, although few of us choose to go there willingly.

This year has brought many of us, for a number of reasons, to a vast, dry, desert landscape. Here today, it is our own longings that respond to the vision of hope. We are lifted up by those words which are sung as the opening lines of Handel's Messiah: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God," – the words from Isaiah chapter 40.

Energised, poised and waiting expectantly, we discover that John's preparation was a call to confession and repentance. This Advent, we are reminded that confession is our deliberate recognition of our place in relationship with God and others, of the words, actions and thoughts that distance us from God's vision for our lives, and of those that draw us closer.

To repent, we are told, is to be grieved by our faults, to change our minds and, significantly, to turn around. Jan Richardson wrote that it is difficult to make a way for the one who comes if we are not at least turned in the right direction. We must turn away from distractions, in order to greet the one for whom we are waiting. And that is when we will see the path that needs to be made straighter and smoother and more welcoming.

John's call to repentance is as challenging to us today as it was for those who responded beside the Jordan River. Repentance leads to personal and community transformation. Today we remember that each of us

is called to 'prepare the way for God' in our families, friendships, and communities. Our preparation is how we participate in the events unfolding around us – the arrival of the realm of God among us. Our preparation opens up pathways of healing, reconciliation, and blessing. We become part of the good news proclaimed by John.

I want to end referring closely to a passage by the author Jan Richardson. She wrote, 'Although the Advent path leads us through the desert, deprivation is neither the focus nor the final word of the wilderness. As the honey-eating John knew, the desert offers its own delights. What the wilderness gives us is a path that helps us perceive where our true treasure lies.'

'What the wilderness gives us is a path that helps us perceive where our true treasure lies.' There's more. Here is the most exciting Advent promise of the hope that is to come: 'The wilderness does not merely give us a path. It empties us enough so that a path is made within us. Through us. And of us.'

If we know what it is to prepare the way for the Lord and make straight paths for him, then my prayer for us all is that this Advent season you discover that you too are a way for the Christ who comes. You too are a road for the holy to enter the world.