

Sermon 051221 - Prepare the way of the Lord

Prayer

This morning I want to start with something that was drummed into me at school as I prepared for life ahead – that punctuation matters! I'll be honest, at the time I didn't really appreciate the relevance, and certainly didn't imagine it would ever be a good starting point for a sermon!



Let me start with a simple example on the screen; a simple note to me from a girlfriend who didn't believe in punctuation!

Take a look at this – the raw unpunctuated version

Punctuation Matters

◆ *Dear Dave*

◆ *I want a man who knows what love is all about you are generous loving kind thoughtful people who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior you have ruined me for other men I yearn for you I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart I can be forever happy will you let me be yours*

◆ *Nikki*

Was she declaring her undying love for me?; Or was she giving me the brush off??

Punctuation matters! And it matters too in the bible, and in the reading of our gospel this morning.

Come on – or brush off??

<i>Dear Dave,</i>	<i>Dear Dave,</i>
<i>I want a man who knows what love is all about.</i>	<i>I want a man who knows what love is.</i>
<i>You are generous, loving, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior.</i>	<i>All about you are generous, loving, kind, thoughtful people who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior.</i>
<i>You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you! I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy - will you let me be yours?</i>	<i>You have ruined me. For other men I yearn. For you I have no feelings whatsoever! When we're apart I can be forever happy - will you let me be?</i>
<i>Nikki</i>	<i>Yours, Nikki</i>

Take a look at this part of our Gospel reading from Luke this morning:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation” (Luke 3 vv4-5)

Two voices...

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.

And all people will see God’s salvation”

(Luke 3 vv 4-5)

“A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.’

Isaiah (40 vv 3-5)

And compare it with the section from the prophet Isaiah that Luke says he is quoting:

“A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.” Isaiah (40 vv 3-5)

When we read the gospel we hear “the voice of one calling in the wilderness” and our mind immediately goes to John the Baptist calling to people from the banks of the river Jordan. But what the prophet Isaiah said is “A voice of one calling:... ‘In the desert prepare the way for the Lord’.”

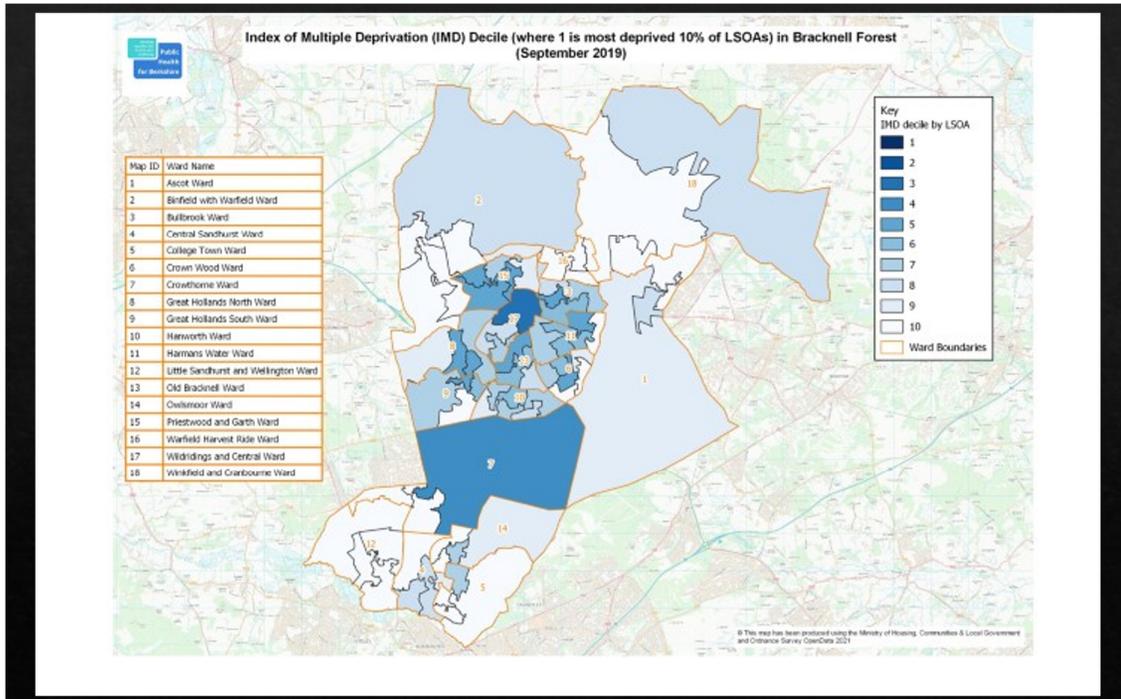
And I think the difference is important. To be honest, a ‘voice calling in the desert’ is actually pretty useless – by definition a desert is normally deserted, so a voice calling there will generally go unheard! However a voice calling out: “Get out into the desert, and get busy road building!” made perfect sense in the culture of the time. When the a visit from the King was expected the people would get together to ensure his approach was as smooth and comfortable as possible. A national road building and repair programme was a key part so that the King arrived comfortable, not jolted and jarred! In general Kings should be stirred by how well their kingdom is being maintained, not be shaken to bits by its roads!

So my contention this morning is that this passage is far more than an introduction to a hairy prophet ranting at the edge of the wilderness – it is a call to action to start preparing the way for the King! And if that is the case, then at advent there is special relevance for us as we await the return of the King, so let’s unpack this a bit more.

Most of us will have heard sermons which start off speculating about what we would do if we were informed that the Queen were coming to visit our home today. Answers typically involve tidying up, running the Hoover round, getting out the posh crockery, baking a fine cake – oh, and putting on our smartest clothes!

So what does this passage tell us to do to prepare for the king’s arrival? “Go out into the desert!” Get out of your comfortable place, and go out into the wild untamed and dangerous places!! That is a key message this Advent! Get out of your cosy nice place, and head for the desert – there’s hard work to be done!

I think this is a message to us as a church, and to us as individuals – it is a call to action.



We are amazingly fortunate in Sandhurst – it really doesn’t feel like a desert! I was recently looking at the published statistics on deprived areas which is published at ward level throughout the country. What is most noticeable is that NO ward in Bracknell forest is in the bottom 20% nationally, and indeed most wards, including virtually all of Sandhurst, are in the top 20% - the least deprived areas in the country.

Yet I promise you there are plenty of Desert spots out there – places where it is spiritually dry and dusty, places where food is scarce or absent, places where dangers lurk. And the call to all of us is to “go out” and find those places.

As a church we have a history of doing so – and a history of forgetting we have done so! How many of us realise that the Day Centre and Sandhurst Voluntary Care which offer amazing services to the elderly and infirm started life as an outreach from the church? They was inspired by Dr David Bryant who was an amazingly pioneering member of the church for many years! I remember him telling me how he had installed a heat pump for his home back in the 1950’s – long before the technology started to become part of the green eco revolution! How often do we ask our representative on the Day Centre committee about their needs, offer practical help, or even pray for them? Do we even know we have a representative let alone who she is?



More recently the church has spawned two more spin-offs – Sandhurst Counselling Service and Sandhurst Youth. Corporately the church is still more involved in these, providing substantial core funding and facilities. But do we really hold them close, and value them – do we seek them out and to ask their needs, do we hold them high in our prayers. Every day they are out reaching those who are in “desert” places: The counselling service is seeing ever more people who are walking in the dark places of their minds – struggling with depression, anxiety and trauma. Their work is valued by the Bracknell Forest Council, by Public Health, and by the NHS who regularly refer clients to them, and their support is valuable, especially financially, but let us not forget that the roots of the service lie here deep in the church and the pioneering work of Sue Smith 30 years ago. Let us pray, seek them out to show them we care and value them, let us seek practical ways we can support their work.

Every week our youth worker Mike and his team of paid session workers are out on the streets of Sandhurst meeting the young people of the town. Some of course are there by choice, but others are there because home is not a safe place to be, or because Mum and Dad (if he’s still around) are out at the pub. The desert places are real – the underpass at Snaprails, the path from Owlsmoor to Crowthorne – places where danger or marauding gangs (yes even here in Sandhurst) await the unwary. It takes courage and determination for Mike to get out there day after day, especially knowing that his presence won’t always be appreciated either by well meaning “adults”, or by some of the less well intentioned young people – he’s been warmly welcomed and cheered by many, but he’s also been confronted with knives and violence, and threatened with “we know where you live” - yet he keeps going out into the desert day after day. How many people have offered Mike simple hospitality – inviting him round for a cup of tea or a meal in the three and a half years he’s been here? How many take time to befriend the young people who are around here in church?

Then there is the work with the food bank and the Coop – quietly taking food supplies to those who, inspite of the apparent wealth of our area cannot make ends meet – again, week after week they are out there in the desert places. Our annual Gift Tree project too will bring a little cheer to the most deprived children in the area – another example of the church reaching out to make the Lord’s way known in the desert places.

And then there’s my personal favourite part of this church building itself – no not our splendid stained glass windows, our historic font, our ageing spire in need of repair, nor even our dilapidated heating system. My favourite bit of this church is something you have all walked past many times and probably not even noticed – it’s a bundle in the corner of the North Porch – a pillow and sleeping bag that are there for those nights when our local tramp chooses the church as the place to lay his weary head – and my thanks go to



John and George for the nights when they invite him into the Rectory for a meal and some warmth, and to Karen and her nursery crew for the mornings when he can at least enjoy some tea and toast before he's on his way.

These are all clear examples of how, as a corporate church, we are engaged in "going out" to the desert places. What do you feel as you reflect on this?

Do you see it and think "Ah good, I can feel good about myself because I am part of a church that is doing all this!" A sort of "imported virtue and feel good factor"? Or do you feel angry and saddened that even in this area there are so many "desert places" that are calling out? Perhaps you feel fearful either at the way the desert is growing, or that the Lord may be calling you to become more engaged?

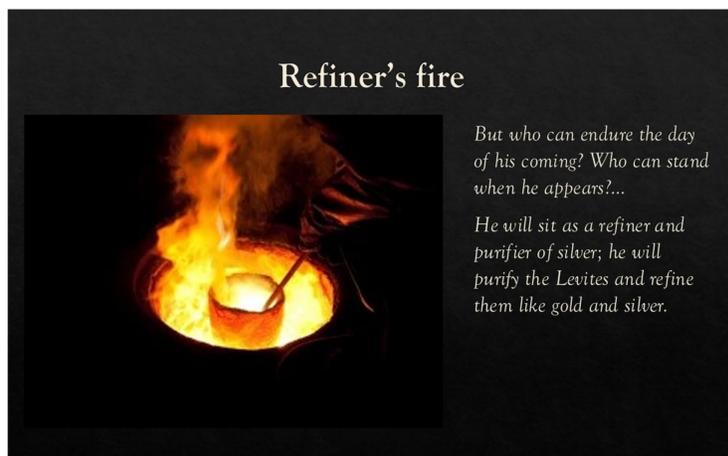
How do you react to God's call to you personally to get out there to the desert? I'm not asking you to tell me, but rather to reflect yourselves because your answer will tell you something about your faith, and your belief that Jesus is coming back, and has given us a clear instruction!

But why has he given us this instruction? Why does he want us to make straight the roads, fill in the potholes? When Jesus returns is he seriously concerned about whether he'll have a bumpy ride?? I think not!

When Jesus first came he was, absolutely, a king – the visit of the Magi confirmed his status right at the start of his life, but he dedicated his ministry to being "out there" in the desert places of his community – among the outcast, the devalued, the sick, the lame, even the dead – and bringing the healing that is God's heart for all his creation. He didn't invite them at that stage to come to a fancy service at his synagogue, or even to the temple – in fact he even offended many by telling them that the Temple would be destroyed – and then coupled it with a promise that he would rebuild it in our hearts!

God hates injustice! It is the very antithesis of his righteousness and love! That's why he promises to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, welcome the refugee, to set the prisoners free – these people matter to him and he longs for them to be embraced by the wholesomeness of his love. And he longs for us to reflect this in our lives – in the way we perceive and interact with those around us! He wants us to burn with the same anger and fire as he does!

The whole of the book of Malachi from which we read this morning tells us of God's furious anger at the way his people were failing to show his righteousness and love – and in the section we read this morning he promises that when he returns we will be "refined" – the image here is one of molten metal here being heated till all the



impurities rise to the surface and can be scraped off – I don't think that will be particularly pleasant, but I'd definitely want to be part of the metal, not the impurities!

God is burning with anger at the unrighteousness of the world. He calls us as members of his kingdom to do something – to get out there into the places of pain and sorrow and hurt and injustice and get active – to raise the temperature, to make a noise, to offend and infuriate the world that has created these situations – to be living agents and signs that the road is being prepared for the return of the King!

Why? Because then “the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.” God wants us to reveal his glory, his purity and holiness, his flaming anger at injustice, his righteousness! He wants us to reflect in how we live – motivated not by our desire for our own comfort, but for righteousness – so that the world gets a glimpse of His glory and majesty.

They will see it in our lives and how we live them – not in the comfort of being in the least deprived 20% of the country, or in our fine historic church building, but in the passion, anger, zeal of our lives, and our courage and determination to see justice and mercy roll through our land.

Are you prepared to get out into the desert and to be hot and angry this Christmas? Or will you spend it getting the tree the turkey and the Christmas pud ready for a nice comfortable feast? Desert or Dessert – you decide!

It's not me asking – it's what God's word calls us to – if we read it with the right punctuation!

