

## **Preparing the way of the Lord      by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

### **Who's coming?**

A few days ago I was taking a primary school assembly, and I asked if anyone knew what Advent meant – no one did. So I explained that it meant “coming”, and asked who was coming? Can you guess what the response was from the first child I asked? Santa Claus.

One of the traditional secular songs we hear in shops at this time of year is *Santa Claus is coming to town*, a song first recorded in 1934, and covered by many well-known artists from Bing Crosby to Mariah Carey. Although you might think it has nothing to do with Advent, actually I think it very much does. The song tells children that Santa knows who's been bad or good, “so be good, for goodness' sake!” The song doesn't need to remind children that how they've behaved will determine whether or not they get presents when Santa comes.

I guess by now you've probably made the connection with the message of John the Baptist, who told people that the Messiah was coming, and so people needed to repent of their sins. And of course, for Christians Advent isn't just about preparing to celebrate the coming of Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem, but about preparing for his Second Coming as

Judge of the world – which was probably what John the Baptist thought was about to happen in his day.

## **Preparing the way of the Lord**

Our reading from the prophecy of Malachi refers to a messenger being sent ahead of the Lord to prepare the way for his coming. In Mark's version of the story of John the Baptist this is quoted, along with the quotation from Isaiah which we heard in the passage from Luke. Although Luke doesn't use this quotation from Malachi, he does refer to the fourth chapter of Malachi, where we read:

<sup>5</sup> Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.<sup>1</sup>

In Luke chapter 1 this is quoted by the Angel Gabriel when he appears to John's father Zechariah in the temple<sup>2</sup>. The angel tells Zechariah that the son that will be born to him

will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

## **God's initiative**

My theme today is "Preparing the way of the Lord". The first thing we need to realise is that long before John the Baptist, God was already preparing the way for his Son to come to

---

<sup>1</sup> Malach 4:5-6 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:

earth as our Saviour, and in due course, as our Judge. If you think that preparing for Christmas involves a lot of work, stress and frustration, think about what preparing for Jesus' coming meant to God!

The readings of our Christmas carol service pick out moments in God's developing plan. Even in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve had just disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, God promises that the offspring of the woman will bruise the serpent's head – interpreted by Christians as meaning that Christ would defeat Satan, whose temptations lead human beings into rebellion against God. God later chooses Abraham to be the founder of the nation of Israel, through whose faith all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Centuries later, King David becomes the prototype, if you like, of a king who would rule under the authority of God. And through prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah, God promised that one day the Messiah would come, a descendant of David, who would bring in an era of justice and peace for the whole world.

### **What about us?**

That's all very interesting, you may say, but what has all this got to do with us?

Everything! You see, God's plan isn't finished yet. Sending his Son into the world to live among us, reveal God to us and die and rise again was only part of the plan. Before his Ascension to heaven, Jesus commissioned his followers to proclaim the Gospel to everyone in the whole world, and if we call ourselves Christians, that is, followers of Christ, then this includes us. If you like, we have the same job as John

the Baptist – preparing people to receive Christ. Our context is very different, and our methods also need to be, but God is still calling people to change their ways and their attitudes, to turn away from sin and be reconciled to him.

John began his ministry, according to Luke, in the year 28 AD, the fifteenth year of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, in Palestine. We are called to bear witness to Christ in the year 2024 (and the following years) in Sandhurst, and wherever we live and work.

### **Challenges and opportunities**

Compared to John the Baptist, we have both challenges and opportunities. John was speaking to people who lived in a society that was overtly religious. People were steeped in the Jewish religion, and were familiar with the writings of the Bible, even if they couldn't read. In our culture, we are overwhelmed with communication of all kinds, but knowledge of the Bible is declining rapidly.

Fortunately, however, some vestiges of communal Christianity linger on in the popular culture. Many people are familiar with Christmas carols (by which I mean Christian hymns, not Rudolph and *White Christmas*!). What an amazing opportunity Christmas gives us to share the good news of Jesus with others! How easy would it be to invite a neighbour, friend or family member who doesn't go to church to come to a Christingle service, a carol service or even a Comedy and Carols evening such as we are having tonight! And what about you joining the group of carol singers who will be singing around the streets on Monday week, collecting for the Children's Society? There are also

opportunities to sing carols tomorrow evening with members of Sandhurst Baptist Church at the Village Inn, or with our choir on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> at the Bird in Hand, the White Swan and the Rose and Crown. Your singing won't be any worse than those who are enjoying a drink!

## **Sharing Jesus**

I know that many Christians are very shy about sharing the good news of Jesus, or think that you have to know all the answers before you stick your neck out. We all have different ways we can share our faith, but by calling ourselves Christians we are committing ourselves to be part of God's plan to bring salvation to the world. Words are not the only way – we can show God's love by going out of our way to listen to a friend who is having a hard time, or by offering to pray for someone. And then when there is an opportunity, we can share that knowing God is with us has helped us to get through difficult times, and gives our life a sense of purpose and meaning.

Being a witness for Jesus is not about drawing attention to *ourselves*. It's about humbly acting and speaking in such a way that people see Jesus in us and are drawn to him. We don't need to pretend we have all the answers, or that we're in some way better than others. The work of John the Baptist was to prepare people to receive Jesus. By God's grace, each of us can have a part to play in God's plan too.

## **Tuning in to God**

So what can we do to prepare ourselves for sharing Jesus with others? Luke tells us that when John grew up he spent

time in the wilderness, preparing for what God wanted him to do. And then, we read today, when the time was right, “the word of God came to John”.<sup>3</sup>

If we want to make ourselves available for God to use, we need to tune in to God. There’s no substitute for a daily time set aside for prayer. For some this is easier to achieve than for others. Being a parent, I know how busy life can be when you have to look after children and do a full-time job. You still need to make time for your spouse and for friends and have some relaxation. Others have elderly relatives or other dependents that need time and energy. But if you really want to find time to pray, you can do it, even if you have to do it while driving the car, washing up or walking the dog. And there are now many online resources and apps for your phone to make it easier to tune in to God. See the [Prayer page](#) on the church website for details.

## **Conclusion**

Christmas tells us that in Jesus God came to be with us, to share our joys and sorrows and to lead us to eternal life. Jesus came to be our Saviour, so that we could know God personally and be ready for the day when we will meet him as our Judge. As Christians we have a responsibility to help others also to know God through Jesus. This Advent, let us take the opportunities God gives us to follow the example of John the Baptist and prepare the way of the Lord.

---

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:2