

Prepare the Way

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[0 : 00] Is your guest room ready? That's the question I asked myself when I read these verses from Luke last week. And I asked that question of us this morning. Are we getting our guest room ready this Advent? If we've no specific guest room, then are we making space to put up a camp bed?

Are we getting ready to welcome Jesus over the threshold and into our lives again this Christmas? I believe John is calling us to do just that rather than reject Jesus as a cold caller or simply keeping him talking at the doorstep. Are we prepared to open the door wide and say, come in, come in, it's nice to see you. Won't you stay a while?

We may dread the maze and melee of December, yet would not be without Christmas. We may be overwhelmed by the questions and choices that Christmas preparations and celebrations create. It can all just seem too much. So much so that we can be put off with the wilderness of advertising and world expectations. And somehow this year they seem to be more full on than ever.

What are we preparing for? Are we ready to challenge the wilderness of the world at the moment? There's certainly, there's surely a yearning for something more, something better.

[1 : 36] But into the desert time of Pontius Pilate's governorship of Judea, Herod was Tetrarch of Galilee and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. John hears the word of God. John who brings the advert, the trailer for Jesus. John who preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John the baptizer. John, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare the way for Jesus, the Messiah. It was a time of oppression and misery for the people and it was escalating.

The different political and religious powers vying for position and authority. There were the ruling Romans with the local governor and the emperor who was worshipped by some as a kind of God in parts of the empire. Then there were the two Herods.

Herod the Great, sorry, there were the two Herod the Great's sons who ruled part of the country with the Romans' permission. The Jews didn't rate them and these rulers caused much fear and oppression.

[2 : 51] Remember Herod who later on had all the baby boys killed? And not to be, oh sorry, it was before that, wasn't it? It was before, yes, it was before, not after. And not to be left out with a high, high priests who were not seen as very much better than the other lot.

Oh dear, and oh dear. For we can sense some of this sort of thing in our own day, can't we? In many parts of the world there is very definitely oppression and fear, injustice and suffering, poverty and lack of basic needs.

We can bring to mind places like Afghanistan, South Sudan, North Korea, Syria and many others. And closer to home, there's much concern or much to concern us.

The increasing incidence of stabbings and killings, of domestic violence, of poverty and many other injustices. In Galilee, there was a groundswell of resistance and desire for change.

It was a volatile situation. The Jews were also still waiting for their promised Messiah and they'd been waiting a long time to hear God's prophetic word fulfilled.

[4 : 08] A time for renewal and for God to reveal himself. And in our own day, in our own country, there's a sense in many that God is about to act.

That revival and renewal are imminent. Do we believe that God can do such a thing today? Are we prepared? Are we prepared? Into the hotbed of power, posturing and struggle, the word of God came to John.

And also quite literally in the wilderness as Isaiah had prophesied. The time had come. The time had come to get ready, to prepare. It was time to seriously prepare for the coming of the Lord.

It was clean up time. John had been called to prepare a way for the Lord through all of that. He calls for the people of Israel to turn back to God.

To clean up their lives by getting rid of the things that prevented them from knowing the fullness of God's love. The things that kept them from enjoying the knowledge of him.

[5 : 14] But not just the knowledge of him. But the reality of him in their lives. The wilderness where he was preaching and baptizing was a physical place. But he was speaking into the wilderness areas of their lives too.

The despair of their situation. Their lack of trust. And the getting bogged down in the problems they faced. They were living in the darkness of fear and oppression.

And doesn't that ring bells for us now? We know of people who feel that sense of being bogged down. Of being fearful. We see it and hear it in our news bulletins.

John is preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He is preaching about straightening things out. Filling in the potholes. Leveling things up.

It sounded impossible to change. Just as it can seem impossible to live with losing or getting rid of what seems necessary to live our lives.

[6 : 25] Going back to the guest room, spare room analogy. The potential for filling a spare room when it's not in use can make it into a bit of a wilderness, can't it? Just as the clutter of national life with Brexit, COVID, climate emergency and all manner of other issues can seem like a wilderness out there.

But the clutter can also accumulate in our spiritual lives. We can lose our focus on Jesus, God with us, Emmanuel, if we're not careful.

And it's all that clutter that we're being urged by John to lose in the baptism of repentance. To be prepared to lose everything in order to be prepared for the way of the Lord.

Some of our young people are being baptised next week. A special time for them and for us. A losing of the old self, a washing of the old and a rising to a new life in Christ.

Be sure to pray for them as they prepare during this coming week. Advent is a time of preparation. A time of tidying up.

[7 : 38] A time to prepare the guest room again. It's a time to get rid of the unnecessary bits and pieces and focus again firmly on Jesus. How do we answer the call to prepare ourselves to encounter Jesus?

Not only this Christmas, but when he comes again to bring heaven and earth together as one. To judge the living and the dead.

Laying ourselves open in honest repentance. Willingly surrendering all to Jesus. Believing in him completely is surely what is asked of us.

And that requires discipline. Of which we heard more in an earlier teaching series this year. And last week Clive spoke of encouragement.

So let's encourage each other as we prepare in this time. But we're also called to help others to be prepared. To be prepared themselves to encounter Jesus.

[8 : 43] And I think there are some clues in John's quote from Isaiah chapter 40. Every valley shall be filled in. Every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight. The rough ways smooth. For then all people will see God's salvation. We're being urged to go into those wilderness places and start paving the way for Jesus.

Is that just talk? No. It's about recognizing places and people that we can engage with in some way. And being willing to take a step of faith.

Sometimes a leap of faith. Perhaps. And to engage with people in a way that builds relationships of mutual trust and respect.

That to me is something of what it is to fill in the valleys and lower the hills. Of smoothing the rough places and straightening out crooked roads.

[9 : 48] It's not about taking a hammer to crack a nut. But taking sandpaper to smooth the rough edges. Sometimes that will mean taking a stand on something we believe to be wrong.

Sometimes it will be a gentle nudge of conscience. It is always being who Jesus calls us to be. Faithful and true.

But loving and kind first. It can be tough. We can get it wrong by keeping our mouths firmly shut just as much as we can. We can get it wrong by leaping in with a barbed comment.

But we are nevertheless called to prepare the way for the Lord. Preparing people's hearts and minds through good relationships. That prepares them for the bigger questions.

It's what's been happening with so much of what we are about out of Christchurch. I say out of because it's not just about what happens in here.

[10 : 49] But what happens outside. Where we are living each and every day. We do hear stories of people in workplaces and other groups who gently but firmly take a stand for their faith.

Although they may be goaded or made the butt of jokes. They are often surprised to find they are the point of contact or reference. When a colleague or friend encounters a difficulty in their lives. Is that not preparing the way for the Lord? Preparing the ground for the timely and right opportunity to offer God's love to another? But we can make those confident stands only if we are prepared ourselves.

This Advent. Let's be intentional in our preparations of waiting. Of getting ready. Getting ready to welcome Jesus and offer him a permanent guest room in our lives.

We may feel we are past doing. Able to do anything. But we are never too old. Or too young. To prepare the way for change. When we are asked.

[12 : 03] Are you ready for Christmas? What will you reply? We should always be ready for Christmas. We can always have our guest room prepared and ready to welcome Jesus in.

So let's encourage each other in our preparations this Advent. Let's pray together. Come Lord Jesus.

As we stop to look and listen in preparation this Advent. Open our hearts to the light of your presence with us. Open our eyes to see where you need us to be your guiding presence for others. May we encourage each other. As we seek to follow you ever more closely. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. God bless you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[13 : 26] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.