

# Advent 2

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[ 0 : 00 ] Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.! Prepare the way for the Lord.

! Make straight paths for him.! It wasn't a diamond.

In fact, it wasn't any kind of jewel. So what was it that made this 24.7 kilograms piece of rock so special?

It was a meteorite from Mars. Now, there are quite a few of these, not a lot of them, but there are a few of them around, but this reckons to be the largest known piece of Mars on planet Earth.

And it was not without controversy as to whether it was right to sell it and who bought it and all the rest of it, but that's not really the point that I want us to think about right now. The point that I would invite us to think about is how there is so much fascination over the notion of something not of this world entering our world.

[ 1 : 41 ] Hold on to that image. The message of John the Baptist, the message of Advent, and why we celebrate, why we engage this season as Christmas approaches, it's not something we just do for the sake of having a liturgical calendar.

It's something that we do as a reminder that is an important thing that we need throughout our whole lives, throughout the whole year of our lives, every single day. And that is to be refreshed in and reminded of the importance of getting ready, of being ready, of being prepared.

And as John's message was one of pointing towards the coming of the ministry of Jesus on Earth, so that dynamic of expectation is set before us as the very thing that we need to kindle every single day of our lives.

Getting ready to meet with the ultimate visitor to this world. Getting ready to meet with the one who enters this world who is not of this world.

Not to meet with a chunk of rock from Mars, or even a living thing from Mars, but to meet with the living one who created heaven and earth and Mars and everything in the whole universe.

[ 3 : 25 ] The theme of getting ready is something that is a very widespread message in wider media as Christmas approaches.

But it tends to carry that meaning of getting ready for hosting a big party. And the more we kind of look into that and read into it and see what people have to say about it, the less it has to do with the kind of expectation and getting ready that God would probably want us to be engaged with.

A few weeks ago I was reading in the, I'm not sure if it was the November or December edition of Good Housekeeping. Yes, I did say that. I'm not a subscriber.

I get it from a mum who does enjoy reading it. And when we were visiting her and it's always a copy laid out there, I'll fess up to it, I do quite enjoy reading it. But there was an article there entitled How to Prep Your Home for Guests with Christmas on the Horizon.

I'm just going to briefly read through these 22 tips. Number one, consider the layout of your home before you do anything.

[ 4 : 56 ]     Number two, there's a whole load I'm missing out here and I'm not even going to do it, I'm just giving you the headline points. Number two, always clean before you put up the decorations. Oh, help.

Number three, be proactive about pine needle pickup. If you have a real tree, invest in a tree skirt to catch fallen needles.

Number four, leave room for outer wear. Create a designated space for your front door for guests' coats and shoes. That way no one will end up tripping over a rogue boot.

Number five, lay out the dinner table before the big day. Number six, prepare what food you can in advance. Number seven, declutter your fridge before you do the Christmas shop.

Eight, clean the fridge while it's mostly empty. Nine, make use of other rooms for food storage if you can. Ten, empty the freezer.

[ 6 : 01 ]     Two, eleven, inspect your cookware ahead of Christmas Day. Twelve, clean your oven in advance of the day.

thirteen, make the beds with care. This is hilarious. Number fourteen, create a space for guests to store their clothes. Clear a shelf and rail for them and add velvet hangers.

Number fifteen, welcome your guests with beverage stations. make a travel kettle, move a travel kettle or a pod coffee machine and cups into the guest room to create their own little hot drink station.

Milk and sugar make a nice addition too, although you'll need a mini fridge for the latter. Sixteen, provide a laundry bag for dirty washing. Seventeen, fluff the towels.

Eighteen, if you really want to go to gold, oh my word, you could provide dressing gowns and slippers. The things we love to wear at home but that are impractical to pack in a suitcase.

[ 7 : 13 ]     Nineteen, leave amenities out for your guests. It's a thoughtful touch to provide soap, shampoo and toothpaste. Twenty, deep clean the toilet ahead of their arrival.

Scrub the seat, lid and bowl with a dedicated bathroom cleaner. Twenty-one, we're coming to the end now. Literally. Don't forget about the toilet brush.

Deep clean this by filling the holder with hot soapy water and swilling it around with the brush in place. Tip that away and rinse the brush holder.

Repeat with cold water and a couple of drops of bleach. Soak for ten minutes then pour away and rinse. And finally, last but not least, number twenty-two, give the shower a deep clean too.

Well, I trust you've done all that already. I mean, come on. The irony is that the first, that appears towards the end of that particular edition, the first half is full of articles telling you how to relax and not be stressed written by fully qualified life coaches.

[ 8 : 35 ]     How might Advent as a theme that's not just confined to December, how might it help us to get ready in a genuine way?

How does God want us to get ready and to be ready for him? How might this truly be a time and an invitation to reconnect with God in a deeper, deeper way?

I just want to draw attention to these words of John the Baptist. Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near. prepare the way for the Lord and make straight paths for him.

That breaks down into three parts. The first is repent. To turn round, literally, is what it means, but to turn around not just as a one-off thing that we do at the point where we become a Christian, at that point of conversion, but rather that call to turn round is an ongoing thing every day of our lives.

It's a daily call, not just a one-off. And I guess the question it puts to all of us is every day to ask. When we think about turning around, are you walking away from God or walking towards him?

[ 10 : 12 ] I can't answer that question for you. Only you can. My guess is if you were told that over there there's a chunk of rock in the corner that's arrived from Mars, you'd probably be a little bit interested.

You probably wouldn't want to pay three point something million pounds for it. But my guess is you'd walk towards it. If the fundamental claims of the Christian gospel are true, that the author of heaven and earth has entered earth, why would we want to walk away from him?

So as we think of those words of John the Baptist that say repent, turn around, let that be a daily question.

In our actions, our decisions, our values, our thought patterns, are we walking away or are we walking towards him? Second thing is that John goes on to say the kingdom of heaven has come near.

I'm not sure that we really recognise that in our daily lives. That we live in that time in history, perhaps this becomes eclipsed by the fact that some 2,000 years has passed since Jesus' earthly ministry and the words of John the Baptist, but we tend to lose sight of the fact that our time on earth in history is actually really, really short.

[ 12 : 15 ] But that has been preceded by Jesus' time on earth, by his life, his death and his resurrection. And our time here in this space is preceded by that which he has already done.

and therefore the kingdom of heaven is a continual reality that shines over every single day of our lives here, but we just don't wake up to it.

The kingdom of heaven is here. So much of what is happening in our lives spiritually, because it's invisible, we don't necessarily see it, we don't perhaps connect with it, but it's there and we need to be aware.

And I would suggest that being ready, being prepared, is about knowing that God is active, even when we can't see how he is being active. Let me read to you a true story that it goes back to 1990, before the start of the Bosnian War.

Malcock family lived next to a small lake in the northwestern village of Jezero. One day in 1990, Smejo Malcock returned from a trip to Austria with an unusual gift for his teenage sons, David and Katib.

[ 13 : 44 ] It was an aquarium with two goldfish. Two years passed before Bosnian-Serb forces advanced on Jezero.

The women and children fled and the men stayed back to resist the attacking soldiers. Smejo Malcock was killed. When his wife, Fahima, sneaked back into the destroyed village to bury her husband and rescue what remained of her belongings, she took pity on the fish that was still there in the aquarium.

She let them out into the nearby lake, saying to herself, this way, they might be more fortunate than us. Fast forward to 1995.

Fahima Malcock returned with her sons to Jezero. Nothing but ruins remained of their home and their village. Through misty eyes, she looked towards the lake.

Glimpsing something strange, she walked over to the shore. The whole lake was shining from thousands of golden fish in it, she said.

[ 14 : 56 ] It made me immediately think of my husband. This was something he left me that I'd never hoped for. During the years of killing all around the lake, life underwater had flourished.

After their return, Fahima Malcock and her sons started caring for and selling the goldfish. By 1998, homes, stores and coffee shops all over the region featured aquariums containing fish from Jezero.

The Malcock house, rebuilt on its original site, was one of the biggest in the village, with two new cars parked in front, and the family saying that they have enough money to quit worrying about the future.

David Malcock said it was a kind of special gift from our father. All the while, it seemed that there was just war, chaos and destruction in all directions.

Things were happening underneath the surface. And our focus can be so much on what is going wrong with the world and what might be uncertainties and within our own lives, tragedies even.

[ 16 : 24 ] Let's not lose sight of those words of promise. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is near. Far, far nearer than we tend to realise.

And the invitation to be ready to meet with Jesus, to encounter him and his Holy Spirit in our daily lives, I would suggest, is an invitation to draw closer and closer to that truth, to ask God daily to connect us even deeper to the things that we cannot see, to open our spiritual eyes and ears and hearts and minds.

to what God is doing. So repent, says John, turn around, come near. Because the kingdom of heaven is near.

It's about nurturing a sense of expectation. Not a sense of expectation and excitement that you're going to suddenly encounter a chunk of rock that has entered our planet from another planet but that sense of expectation that in our daily lives we can meet with the creator and sustainer of the universe.

The thing is, is our dispositions, our life experiences or whatever, lead us perhaps not to have such a heightened sense of expectation. There's a story of two sons, they were twin brothers and one was an optimist and the other was a pessimist by disposition.

[ 18 : 11 ] There's an experiment, the parents decided to carry out an experiment one particular Christmas. They bought them both a new bike but they decided that they would hide one bike away and wrap the other one up and so they gave the pessimist the bike on the day.

He opened it up, opened up this box, saw the bike inside, pulled the box around from it and took it out of the box and said, oh thank you, thanks, this looks great.

It looks like it's probably going to rain though. I probably won't be able to ride this today and I'm not sure I might fall off. I'm a little bit nervous about this but I'm sure everything will be okay but I kind of might not be very good at riding this and I'm a little bit nervous about this but hopefully I won't fall off and so it went on.

His brother, the optimist, had an identical looking box, he opened it up and inside there was just a load of straw. And he pulled out the straw, there was no bike in sight.

Immediately shot out of the room and he was running around in the garden looking in all directions. His parents thought, what on earth has happened to him? He looked so excited. Eventually they managed to catch him, called him back in and said, what are you doing?

[ 19 : 44 ] He said, I just know there's a pony out here somewhere. We're all different and I'll leave you to decide which personality type, which disposition you come into.

But regardless of what our natural disposition may be, no matter how we may have been shaped and formed by the experiences that life has brought us, the same gospel invites us to shift that perspective.

And that can be hard work, but we are called to be expectant, to know that the kingdom of God is indeed at hand. So, we're called to repent, to turn around, to walk in the direction of the one who's come to us, from outside of this world into this world.

We're called to live like the kingdom is near, that it's at hand to be expectant. But John says, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

What might that mean? I want to suggest that it simply means we pray.

[ 21 : 13 ] And we pray. And we pray. That we pray without ceasing. To make straight paths for him means praying not just as an isolated activity, something that we do if we come to church, or as a one point in the day when we put time aside to spend time in prayer, as vital and as important as all of those things are.

But that we seek that continual connection through practicing the presence of God and knowing the presence of God throughout our day. To make straight paths for him.

To pray. To know that we are not just connecting with somebody from another planet, but with the author of the whole universe.

watchman knee said this about prayer. Our prayers lay the track down on which God's power can come.

Like a mighty locomotive, his power is irresistible, people. But it cannot reach us without rails.

[ 22 : 43 ] Let's be clear. All that God does for us is God's initiative. It's in his power, it's in his sovereignty. It's not about us manipulating him.

But neither is our relationship with God a passive thing where we have nothing to do. The invitation to follow Jesus, the invitation to repent and to live like the kingdom is near, to make straight paths for him, is that invitation to lay down those tracks on which God's power can come.

So let's do that now as we pray. Let's pray together. Lord, as we think of these words of John the Baptist, firstly we hear the words that call us to repentance, to turn around.

We say to you that we are sorry for when we have walked away from you rather than walked towards you. forgive us for our words and our actions and our inactions for when we have not lived the lives that you would have us live.

Lord, we thank you that that call to repent is an invitation that you call us back to you, to walk towards you, that we may know that we are forgiven and that we are restored.

[ 24 : 33 ] So Lord, help us in our daily lives to live in that sense of expectation knowing that your kingdom is near, that heaven is at hand in ways that we may not see straight away.

Help us to live in a way that is expectant and hopeful. Lord, when we are prone to think negatively or despairingly, break through those barriers and enable us to live with a sense of hope and expectation.

Lord, help us to make straight paths for you. Help us to connect with you every day. that your gospel of hope, the good news, all that you would have for your people may come to us and come through us into the lives of others.

Lord, fill us afresh with your Holy Spirit now and as we come to share communion together and in the time to come.

in Jesus name we pray. Amen.