

Preparing The Way - 7th February 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Hey everyone and a hearty welcome to this week's Sunday session. Whether you're dipping your online toes in here for the first time or whether this has become part of your regular routine, it's good to gather together in this way.

My name's Matt, the Vigorous St. John's. I'll be leading us through things here, whilst for younger ones there's another slice of our Sunday Stars playlist because Lottie's on a roll looking at Jesus' claim to be the bread of life.

Back here though, well, how we doing? The good news is January is now behind us, a month which I imagine has taken some grit to get through.

In many ways it feels like we're perhaps finally on our way towards brighter times, not least as the vaccination programme thankfully continues to go brilliantly.

And yet there is this tension between the hope that that's bringing, coupled with the still tragically high death toll from the virus. Patience and perseverance may well be the order of the day therefore at the moment, a need to not let down our guard.

[1 : 18] And yet, if nothing else, the gradually lengthening days are a sign of progress towards happier times ahead. Indeed, to quote the hope of the late Captain Sir Tom Moore, the sun will shine on you again and the clouds will go away.

And so God, we're grateful to be here, glad for the way in which you've provided for our needs so far. But knowing that we're in need of renewed focus perhaps, in order to stay strong and sensible for the season ahead.

Stoke up our fire, we ask, that those embers within may give us the energy we need to see this through. Thank you for the amazing advances and incredible skills of scientists in developing and bringing these vaccines into reality.

Thank you for the dedication and care of NHS staff and the host of volunteers involved in delivering this programme. And long may that efficiency continue. But in the midst of this welcome progress, keep us aware of the needs and predicament faced by so many in the wider world, as we know that every person on our planet needs to be offered these vaccines too.

Indeed, may compassion and not competition guide the way ahead for our government, we pray.

Be with us now as we step into another session with you, asking please for you to enliven and inspire us afresh with the knowledge of what it means to live the full life you faithfully promised to us through Jesus.

[3 : 11] Thank you God. Amen. Amen. All right. Well, I want to begin today by taking us back to the summer of 1986, a summer in which Maradona had just single-handedly won the World Cup for Argentina.

Madonna was at number one with Papa Dolpreach. Tom Cruise was top gun in the movies. And to crown it all, Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson were soon to be married.

I don't know if you can remember where or even if you were around in July 1986. For me, well, I was in the final year at Godwin Junior School in Forest Gate in East London.

My, what, year six class in today's money? I'd just performed our class play. And here's a photo of us with our teacher, Miss Sams.

Right old mixed bunch of kids, fellow 11-year-olds, who I can still remember pretty much all the names of to this day. I've no idea what this play was called, but I do remember the teacher casting the two hardest lads in the class, Robert Borg and Stephen Rossi, as fairies, and dressing them up in tutus, which, as you can see, they were obviously chuffed about.

[4 : 37] And yet my reason for showing you this photo is because of this little incident in the middle. Yes, someone was doing the two-fingered bunny ears sign behind Miss Sams' head.

Now, on getting the photo back from the ironically named Pronto print some two weeks after the play, Miss Sams hit the roof. Which one of you boys behind me ruined this class photo, she said. Now, obviously, there were two possible culprits. There was me. I'm the lad on the left here, cracking bass and haircut and all that.

And there was Gordon Farnes in the brown shirt on the right. Now, I knew it was Gordon who'd bunny-eared Miss Sams.

He had Sanjesh and Olive still on the right of Gordon. They knew it was him. Michaela, on the left of me, knew it was Gordon. You can even tell the class boffin Robert Kisak on the far left knew it was Gordon.

[5 : 44] But on being interrogated, Gordon played hardball, denied all knowledge and instead blamed me. Now, admittedly, I am grinning ear to ear in the photo.

But hand on heart, it wasn't me who bunny-eared Miss Sams. I even pointed out to her the length of Gordon Farnes' middle finger in the photo to try and prove my innocence.

But Miss Sams was judge, jury and executioner. And she put me in lunchtime detention in the last week of my final year at that school.

Now, I got my own back a little bit because during that lunchtime detention, I did manage to sneakily nick this copy of the incriminating photo when Miss Sams went out to get her regular coffee fix.

But here's the sting. Because at the end of the school day, Miss Sams' final words to me, indeed the final words I can ever remember her saying to me were these, Matthew, I expected better of you.

[6 : 52] It's in the same league as I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed. You know, understated but harsh. Since to fail to live up to someone else's expectations, you know, particularly a teacher or someone in authority over you, well, for an 11-year-old child, that's a tough pill to swallow.

And yet carrying the burden of other people's expectations, well, it's an age-old problem, which was just as true for those in the time of the Bible as it is for us these days.

Indeed, aside from Jesus, the person in the Gospel stories who shouldered the weightiest of expectations was probably this guy, John.

The one we know as John the Baptist. I mean, for a start, the circumstances surrounding his birth mark John out as one to watch even before he was born.

You might recall, we looked at this a bit in our Christmas Eve session, but just as a reminder, the man who would become John's dad, a bloke called Zechariah, was visited by the angel Gabriel.

[8 : 06] Zechariah was told that he and his wife Elizabeth, even though they were both on the riper end of life, would, after feeling fruity in their old age, conceive and give birth to a baby who they should call John.

And yet this news came with a pretty startling prediction from Gabriel, who said this, Many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.

He will bring back many of the people to God, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. It's quite the billing, it's quite the expectation, and one which was heightened even further by John's dad, Zechariah himself, who declared at the birth of his son, You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.

This babe in arms was seemingly destined, called by God and identified by his parents, as a prophet who would prepare the way for the Lord, for the Messiah to come, this long-awaited saviour, who was expected to bring new and lasting hope to the people of God.

As a prophet, John would be a spokesperson for God about Jesus. John would be the support act, the MC, the one who would get the crowd ready to rock and roll with Jesus.

[9 : 47] I mean, that's quite an awesome responsibility. That's a weight of expectation to have to carry from such a young age on your shoulders. And yet there's another strand of expectation which John would also have become increasingly aware of as he grew up, because his dad, Zechariah, was a priest.

Indeed, we're told in Luke's Gospel that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were both descended from Aaron, Moses' big brother. And if you were descended from Aaron, you belonged to a priestly family line.

That meant that for the men, at least, sexist, I know, they were entitled to be called priests and were able to serve in the temple in Jerusalem, a huge privilege.

And each priestly division such as Zechariah's would be routed on to serve in the temple for at least a couple of weeks each year. This priestly service helps explain why Gabriel visited Zechariah in the temple with the news of his soon-to-be-conceived baby, John, since it was Zechariah's turn to be on duty with the incense and so on that day.

Now, why is this little priestly detail important? Well, because it tells us that John himself was also therefore part of this priestly family line.

[11 : 14] And that meant that on growing up, John would also be a priest and therefore be expected to serve in the temple, just like his dad and granddad and so on had before him.

And so if we put these two big expectations together, that of John being a prophet, announcing the coming of the Messiah, and that of being a priest, serving in the temple, the place where people would go to meet with God, well, I imagine most people would assume that John would fulfil his prophetic, priestly calling within the temple system, that he'd use the dream combination of the platform of the building and his status as a priest to usher in the Messiah, who again, most people would have assumed would come to the temple as a conquering saviour.

And so the expectation from an early age for John to step up and step into this whole religious system, this temple way of life, would have been immense.

And yet there's a little clue early on in Luke's gospel, which suggests that John's role will actually be fulfilled a world away from the temple and all of its trappings.

Here how Luke describes John. He says this, Lived in the desert?

[13 : 04] Well, we know that John's mum and dad lived in a town in what was known as the hill country of Judea, which was relatively remote. But town life doesn't equate to desert life.

And so some scholars reckon that given the age of John's parents when they had him, John may well have been orphaned at a fairly young age before being taken in by a desert dwelling community.

Possibly it's reckoned down in a place called Qumran in the desert near the Dead Sea. Now we don't know for sure, but the fact that John lived in the desert, well, it's a hint that he was going to be someone who would defy expectations, someone who would be outside on the fringes of mainstream society, someone who from an early age would do things differently.

And that hint that Luke gives us early on is backed up when just a couple of chapters later, the adult John does indeed appear publicly after the word of God came to John in the desert.

God, it seems, speaks to John, calling him to now fulfil his destiny, to prepare the way for Jesus.

Now, having not seen John since he was a baby, what kind of man has John grown up to be?

[14 : 34] Well, if we're honest, he appears like a reject from Woodstock, you know, a right old hippie bloke, proper desert dude whose clothes, we're told, were made of camel hair and who lived off a diet of locusts and date honey.

Indeed, he looked like, he sounded like, he no doubt probably smelled like an Old Testament prophet, you know, a real throwback to blokes like Elijah and Isaiah.

And yet this association, particularly with his clothes, because they're exactly the way Elijah's wardrobe was also described, camel hair and a leather belt and so on, well, it would seem it's a deliberate statement and identification with all of the prophets of old who predicted the coming of the Messiah.

John is the last in a long line of spokespeople who would herald the coming of Jesus. Only for John, well, he's got the privilege of actually passing the mic on to Jesus himself.

Now, by way of warming up the crowd for Jesus, we're told John went around preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

[15 : 52] What does this mean? Well, repentance means to turn around, to turn away from all that we know is wrong. In doing so, we can know the forgiveness of God in order to get rid of any guilt we might be carrying from that past behaviour.

And baptism, well, to be baptised means to be immersed, a kind of symbolic one-off bath by way of saying to God, look, wash all that dirt, that unhelpful stuff from me, please.

And let me start again, having a clean slate with you. And John's was a popular message says, since we're told that the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.

And this little comment is, again, a significant one, because if you notice, it says, all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. John didn't come to the temple in Jerusalem to preach as might have been expected.

No, rather, he met the people on neutral ground, if you like, in the desert, in the open. That's where John decides to do his priestly, to do his prophetic work.

[17:13] Not towing the line within the religious system and structures of the day, and certainly not dressed up in all the priestly robes and clobber that would have come with that. In fact, we don't read about John setting foot inside the temple at all, not once, either to visit or to worship.

Instead, John's preference is to be connecting with and sharing the love of God with people in the everyday surroundings in which they found themselves, and certainly not in the formality and ceremony of the temple.

What's more, John seems to turn his back on most religious rituals as well, in particular with the way he brought his message of baptism to the people.

You see, the idea of being washed clean was already a big part of the Jewish faith, and all through Israel there are archaeological remains from John's day of thousands of ritual baths known as mikvah, such as these, seen in places as varied as Magdala, where we've looked at before, Qumran, interestingly, and then in Jerusalem itself.

They're effectively plunge pools which good Jews were expected to make use of on a regular, even daily, basis. Indeed, the thinking was that since so much of everyday life made you unclean and unworthy, you needed to wash in this ceremonial way in order to be clean enough to approach God in prayer and worship.

[18:54] And yet, despite this practice being the norm for Jewish people in John's day, John instead seems to say, nah, you don't need to go through this daily, guilt-induced, ceremonial washing to talk with God.

Yes, come and be washed clean, but the immersion, the baptism I give you is a one-off occasion since this public act of repentance and embracing of God's forgiveness, well, that's sufficient in God's eyes for him to know you mean business in your faith.

What's more, John didn't perform his baptisms in these mikvah ritual baths as I suppose he could have done. Now, instead, he used the Jordan River.

Again, that in itself is a statement which said, look, you don't need ceremony or formality to meet with God. God is all around, here with us now and probably far more tangible in nature than in a building.

What else? How else did John defy expectations? Well, the message John preached was also incredibly anti-establishment such as challenging the corruption of the day so much so that King Herod had John arrested and eventually beheaded for calling out Herod's behaviour.

[20:20] And yet John's message was also relevant for everyday folks and how they were to live such as these words here from Luke's Gospel chapter 3 starting at verse 10.

John said, what should we do then? the crowd asked. John answered, anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none. Anyone who has food should do the same.

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. Teacher, they asked, what should we do? Don't collect any more than you are required to, he told them.

Then some soldiers asked him, and what should we do? He replied, don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely.

Be content with your pay. And yet through everything John was constantly fulfilling his calling by pointing forwards to Jesus as the one who, in John's words, he was not even worthy to untie the sandals of.

[21:30] And so if John was so anti-establishment, anti-temple, but pro-the-people and pro-living out the ways of God in the world around him, what did Jesus make of John and his message?

Well, Jesus thoroughly endorses John in a way which echoes the predictions of Gabriel and Zechariah before him with words which are about as glowing as it gets.

Indeed, Jesus said to those who encountered John, What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A wreath swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see?

A man dressed in fine clothes? No. Those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. But what did you go out to see?

A prophet? Yes. I tell you, and more than a prophet, this is the one about whom it is written, I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you.

[22 : 44] I tell you, among those born of women, there is no one greater than John. And then most affirming of all, Jesus himself submits to being baptised by John, not because he needs to repent of anything, but instead, amongst other things, it's an endorsement of John and his ways.

It's a statement from Jesus saying, look, John is right. These mikvah, the idea that you've got to carry guilt with you every day, the ceremony and the corruption of the temple system, the fine robes priests wear to set them apart, the idea even that you have to go somewhere special to meet with God, none of that is anything like the good news that I've come to share with you.

Yes, John baptises with water and that's a great start, but I'm going to baptise you, I'm going to immerse you in my spirit says Jesus, so that you'll know God's presence with you, in you, sustaining you, producing good fruit in you all the time.

And indeed all of that, well it sounds to me like the kind of good news we need to hear today. Yes, our church buildings may be special, just as the temple was special, but getting back into them isn't a final destination to aim for, nah, God is with us even, or especially in, the desert places.

God is with us in the wilderness, the no-man's land of lockdown even. Indeed, it's the journey with God, wherever that leads us, which is the destination, not some holy house which can so easily become a place to hide away.

[24 : 51] What's more, when we do meet together, it's not about sticking on our Sunday best or priests wearing indulgent clothes, nah, that mindset belongs in palaces.

Rather, the way of camel hair, the way of sharing your shirts, the way of everyday desert living, that's the way of God. Not because we're being deliberately dreary, but because, heaven forbid, we give the impression that we're superior to anyone else, that we need to put on a show, that we need to keep up appearances.

Nah, why did you go out to see John, says Jesus? Did you go because he dressed well? Nah, you went because he spoke the truth about God's love love.

And that, regardless of status, regardless of look, regardless of location, is something that today we can all play our part in doing, speaking and living out the truth of God's love.

And in order to do that, yes, there's a need to repent, to turn away from all that we know is wrong and embrace God's forgiveness. But that need shouldn't be an ongoing guilt-inducing weight we carry.

[26 : 15] Nah, rather, it's a one-off requirement, a one-off baptism, since God doesn't need a second invitation to come and set up home with us in our lives.

Indeed, when God does, it's then that the adventure of life with God really begins, a life built not on guilt, but on love.

It seems to me that in defying the expectations of those caught up in the priestly system at a temple, John instead fulfills his calling in an altogether truer way.

He was a prophet who spoke the truth about God's love, and he was indeed a priest. only a priest in the true sense, not one immersed in a system saturated with status, but a priest in the sense that he helped people to encounter God, even or especially in the desert places of life.

You know, that's the kind of life, that's the kind of person Jesus endorses. that's the kind of priest I would long to be, that's the kind of person I'd say we'd all do well to aspire to, and that's the kind of prophet we'd do well to listen to and learn from.

[27 : 50] You know, the name John means God is gracious, and John lived in a way which reflected the truth of his name.

my prayer for you and for me in these times of anticipation of better times ahead, in the dryness of this desert before lockdown lifts, is that we would follow John's lead in pointing others towards the good news of Jesus with how we live and how we love.

all right, there's a chance to chew further on what we've been looking at in today's extra time session, but for now, and with all that we've covered in mind, here's a smasher of a song the St. John's Worship Band have recorded this week called Waymaker, in that just as John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus to come, so Jesus himself makes the way for us to know God's love in our lives.

you are here moving in our midst I worship you I worship you you are here working in this place I worship you I worship you you are here moving in our midst I worship you I worship you you are

here working in this place I worship you

I worship you cause you are waymaker miracle worker promise keeper light in the darkness my God that is who you are you are waymaker miracle worker promise keeper light in the darkness my God that is who you are you are here touching every heart I worship you I worship you you are here healing every heart I worship you I worship you you you are here turning lives around

[31 : 29] I worship you I worship you you are here you're mending every heart I worship you I worship you you because you are waymaker miracle worker promise keeper right in the darkness my God that is who you are you are waymaker miracle worker promise keeper right in the darkness my God that is who you you that is you that is you you are that is you

That is who you are.

That is who you are.

That is who you are. That is who you are. That is who you are. That is who you are. That is who you are. That is who you are.

That is who you are. That is who you are. Even when I don't feel that you're working. You'll never stop. You'll never stop working.

[34 : 11] You'll never stop. You'll never stop. You'll never stop. That is who you are. Promise keeper. Light in the darkness.

My God. That is who you are. That is who you are. You are way maker. Miracle worker. Promise keeper.

Light in the darkness. My God. That is who you are. Because you are. Because you are way maker. Miracle worker. Promise keeper. Light in the darkness. My God. That is who you are. Because you are.

Because you are way maker. Miracle worker. Promise keeper. Light in the darkness. My God. That is who you are.

[35 : 08] That is who you are. That is who you are. That is who you are. That is who you are.

That is who you are. That is who you are. That is who you are. That is who you are. That is who you are.

That is who you are. You are way maker. Miracle worker. Promise keeper. Light in the darkness. My God.

That is who you are. You are way maker. You are way maker. Miracle worker. Promise keeper. Light in the darkness. My God.

That is who you are. That is who you are. You are way maker. Miracle worker. That is who you are. That is who you are. That is who you are. You are way maker. You are way maker. Miracle worker. Promise keeper.

[36 : 09] Light in the darkness. My God. That is who you are. You are way maker. Miracle worker. Promise keeper. Light in the darkness. My God. That is who you are. Cracking stuff.

Cracking stuff. Cracking stuff. Okay. Well. Pull the plug there. On things for today. As I said. There is an extra time video.

Available alongside this one. With some additional thoughts. And questions. For us to consider. As we go. On our way. From here. Though. Let's ask.

For God's blessing. To go with us. And so God. As we embark. On a new week ahead. May your blessing. The blessing of God the Father.

God the Son. And God the Holy Spirit. May that blessing. Surround us. So that we can be more like John. In pointing the way to Jesus.

[37 : 30] With how we live our lives. Indeed. May the blessing of God. Be ours. To pass on. To all those. Who we've been given. To love.

And live alongside. Both now. And always. Amen. Amen.