

Sermon Preparing the Way 06.12.09
Advent 2 (C) Baruch 5:1-9 Luke 3:1-6
Julian Templeton Advent 2 2009 Ser.doc

In the 15th year of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, when Herod was Tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip prince of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias prince of Abilene, during high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, *the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* Luke 3:1-2

The evangelist Luke believes it is important to situate his story about Jesus in its wider historical context.

Why else would he take such pains both here and in others parts of his Gospel, to inform us who the various important people are: emperors, governors, rulers, princes and high priests?

Yet, whether he intends it or not, he sets up irony by first telling us who the powerful people are, what position they hold, and then informing us that the word of God came not to any of these but to John the Baptist in the wilderness!

Compared to all these powerful and influential figures, John is a nobody.

Yet it is to John that the word of God comes!

It would be like saying that in the 56th year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, when Boris Johnson was Mayor of London, when Gordon Brown was Prime Minister, when David Milliband was Foreign Secretary and his brother Ed Milliband was Secretary of State, during the Archbishopric of Rowan Williams, *the word of God came to Doris the open air preacher in rural Essex.*

However, to the hearers and readers of Luke's Gospel, John is not a nobody.

In chapters 1 and 2 we are introduced first to Zechariah, a priest, and then to his wife Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is the cousin of Mary who will be the mother of Jesus.

Old and childless, Zechariah receives a visit from the angel Gabriel who announces that Elizabeth will conceive a bear a son to be called John.

It is this John who is born and grows up to be a preacher in the wilderness.

John goes all over the Jordan valley proclaiming that God's chosen people need to turn away from their sinful ways of life, seek God's forgiveness, and as a sign that they have done this they need to be baptised in water.

John calls them to do this because he is preparing the way for the Messiah and the coming Kingdom of God.

Preparing the way.

In industrialized societies the ways upon which we travel have all been prepared for us.

For do we not walk on footpaths and pavements, drive along roads, bridges and motorways; and ride on trains that run along underground and overground railways?

Yet we can do this only because these thoroughfares have first been surveyed; then heavy machinery has moved earth, and engineers and labourers have constructed culverts and bridges and sometimes drilled and blasted tunnels.

Then the asphalt or concrete or paved or railed surface is laid on the way that is prepared.

But what of those ways that have not been prepared?

For most urban-dwellers it is only when we go rambling or hiking that we walk along natural and unprepared routes.

Then we realise the dips and hollows and ditches, the bumps and mounds and hills that have to be negotiated.

We experience first-hand the care required to walk on rough ground, the effort required to climb up steep ascents and down steep descents.

It is this pre-industrialized way of travelling that we need to think ourselves back to in order to understand what it would mean to prepare the way in biblical times.

Luke clearly regards John the Baptist as a preparer of the way, as a forerunner of another who is to come.

And in order to explain to a mainly Jewish audience what John's role is, he refers to a text from scripture already familiar to them.

The text comes from Isaiah 40, where the author writes to the people from the southern Kingdom of Judah who had for many years been exiled in far-off Babylon.

What Isaiah writes is a message from God of comfort and hope.

The comfort is that Judah has served her sentence from which she will now be released.

Cyrus the ruler of Persia has overthrown the ruler of Babylon and has released the Jews from their captivity, allowing them to return to Judah and Jerusalem.

The hope is supplied by a voice from Babylon that cries,

...clear a road through the wilderness for the Lord, prepare a highway across the desert for our God, every valley will be raised, every mountain and hill be brought low, uneven ground be made smooth and the steep places level.

Isaiah 40:4-5

Baruch quotes from this same text, but he seems to be writing this not from Babylon but from Jerusalem, because he writes:

Arise, Jerusalem, stand on the height; look eastwards and see your children assembled...they went away from you on foot, led off by their enemies; but God is bringing them home to you, borne aloft in glory, as on a royal throne. All the high mountains and everlasting hills are to be made low as God, commanded, and every ravine is to be filled and levelled, that Israel may walk securely in the glory of God. Baruch 9:5-6

These texts would have been familiar to the first hearers and readers of Luke's Gospel, so when Luke quotes Isaiah and echoes Baruch to explain the ministry of John the Baptist as a preparer of God's way, those first Jewish Christians would have immediately registered their recognition.

They would have understood that John would play an essential role in preparing the way for God's coming act of liberation.

Yet this preparing of the way will involve the arduous and demanding task of removing obstacles in people's hearts and understanding.

It will involve straightening out what is crooked.

It will involve bringing down those whose arrogance makes them unable to hear and obey.

It will involve raising-up those who in their lowly state cannot believe that God's good news includes them.

And in verses 7-18, John spells out specifically what being prepared to receive God's word will mean to different groups of people.

This is the Gospel text set for next Sunday.

Preparing the way.

More and more I'm coming to realise just how important it is to be a preparer of the way for God's Word.

The preacher, for example, cannot just assume that a congregation will be ready to receive God's Word straight away; rather he or she needs first to prepare the congregation to understand it.

Those of us engaged in pastoral work, Ministers, Elders and others in the congregation, need first to do what we can to help people to be in a position to receive God's Word in worship and in life.

For example, we all encounter people whose self-esteem is low and outlook on life is depressed: sometimes we are those people.

In my experience, it is very little use, indeed it is often counter-productive, to say to such a person: "Cheer up, God loves you!"

In many cases such a person feels that she or he is unloveable.

To prepare the way for God to speak his word of unconditional love to such a person we first need to come alongside them, listen to them, and gradually uncover the root of their feelings of not being worthy to be loved.

Only when these deep feelings of rejection and worthlessness are overcome is the person in a position to receive the good news that God does indeed love them.

Only after such preparation can the valley of despair can be raised up.

Then there are those whose particular life circumstance or disability means that to even be in a position to hear God's Word seems like an impossible mountain to climb.

This is where the Church needs to level-off the steepness of the mountain so that all may surmount it.

And here I mention the many practical things that we can do to make it possible for people to come to worship or for worship to come to them.

Giving people rides to and from Church; visiting the house-bound; having a sound system that works so that the hard-of-hearing can hear; providing text that is large enough for the weak-sighted to see; having an entrance to the building that the less mobile can access. Many of these things you have already done and are doing: these practical things prepare the way for God's Word.

Then again, the hill of pride needs to be lowered; and the crooked way of lies needs to be straightened

This is where the gospel calls us to be prophetic.

There are some whose power, wealth and knowledge is a hindrance to responding to the gospel.

The greedy and those who hoard their wealth need to be challenged to attend to the needs of the poor; for, according to Jesus it is to the poor that the Kingdom of Heaven belong.

Those who lie and connive and distort to protect their vested interests: (oil companies who are clandestinely funding climate-change denying; and dictators who will say that black is white in order to protect their power?)

As Christians, we need to be involved in exposing lies; we must speak up for what is just and right.

But perhaps the most everyday and useful way that we can prepare the way for the gospel is by practising friendship.

I was very struck by one of your members telling me that on his second visit to worship, he was greeted by someone who remembered his name from the week before.

He decided then and there that this was the church for him.

Remembering names, keeping in contact, coming alongside others in friendship, practising hospitality, these are the everyday ways that we can prepare the way of the good news of Jesus Christ.

In a moment you will be invited to take part in a celebration and remembrance of the Lord's Supper.

In this we are reminded that the way taken by Jesus Christ was that of the cross.

Jesus' life, already poured out for others in service, would be sacrificed so that we might die with him to our sins and come alive with him to new life.

Jesus himself is The Way that God prepares for us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen