

Prepare the way! Advent 2, 2017.

When Jay and I were looking to buy a house in Jindabyne prior to our move to our previous parish, we came across one that was obviously a private sale. It had a sign outside and a mobile phone number to contact to make an appointment to inspect the property. We liked the look of the house, so we parked at the bottom of the driveway and rang the number. A man answered and said he'd be happy to show us through the house. Where were we, and when would we like to see it? I answered that we were at the bottom of his driveway, and could we see it then, because we were about to head home to Taralga.

He freaked! "Oh dear!" he said. "We're getting ready to move and the house is full of clutter. We've been away for two weeks, and the grass hasn't been cut...." We assured him it wouldn't matter, and because we were about to leave the area, he reluctantly agreed to show us through. He asked if we'd mind seeing the garden first, giving his wife time to clear away the clutter, so we'd be able to walk through the house.

So that's what we did. When we'd finished seeing the garden, he took us inside, and it was beautifully tidy. It seemed we'd given his wife enough time to prepare the way for the inspection!

That was John the Baptist's job! His task was to prepare the way for Jesus.

Listen to this section from this morning's Gospel reading:

"As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

These words are actually quoted from two Old Testament books. The first part is from Malachi and the second from Isaiah.

Malachi 1:3 says, **"See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me."** Interestingly, the name Malachi actually means 'messenger.' The whole of his book is a message to God's people. This verse is fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptist.

Then the next part of the quote is from our Old Testament reading this morning - Isaiah chapter 40. **"a voice of one calling in the desert, 'prepare the way of the Lord – make straight paths for him.'"** This is also fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist.

For John's hearers, and for us, the message is the same. It highlights three important things for us:

1. The first is that the **Lord's coming is imminent!**

We're all familiar with the experience of 'anticipation'. It can be joyful, and it can be not so joyful. For instance, there is the joyful anticipation (usually) in the count down to the arrival of a new baby. There is the not-so-joyful anticipation as we perhaps await the results of ominous medical tests.

What is common to any experience of anticipation is the *waiting*. When we anticipate an event - joyous or otherwise - the *waiting* is constantly before us.

John the Baptist's words foreshadowed the physical arrival of the Messiah in Palestine. They heralded a time of great anticipation - a time of waiting - giving his hearers time to respond to the message and amend their lives in expectation of the coming of Jesus. For us, John's words foreshadow Jesus' second coming - the culmination of the Christian story.

The difficulty for us, though, this side of the cross, is that the physical return of the Lord has been so long in coming, the anticipation has worn thin, and we are no longer really expecting it to happen any time soon.

2. And so the second thing today's readings highlights for us is **our need to be prepared.**

The Lord will return to purify and to judge, but mercifully, he has sent someone before him to prepare the way. We have warning. Though his coming will be unannounced, like Jay's and my visit to the home owners was, we can nevertheless be forewarned, and we can make sure our house is in order before Jesus gets here.

Our oldest son Joel left home quite young - he was only 16 - because we moved as a family to Goulburn for me to take up ministry, and Joel had already left school. He was very keen to show us he could be self-sufficient. His friends have since spilled the beans - they've told us that whenever we rang to say we would be visiting, he would race around, cleaning and tidying his little flat, making sure everything was spic & span for our arrival, so that we would know how capable he was. (I was tempted to drop in unannounced, but then thought - nah - better not)

In the days of Isaiah there were no roads in the desert between Babylon and Jerusalem. It was a rough trek! Whenever a dignitary traveled that route, workers were sent to clear a pathway. They hacked away the undergrowth, cleared away the rubble and filled in the potholes as best they could, making a straight and clear pathway for the dignitary to travel on.

That's what John was on about as he preached in the desert about repentance. The Messiah was coming into the world and into their lives! He challenged the people to get rid of the things that stood in the way, and to be baptised to show that they were fair dinkum.

REPENT John demanded! Clean up your act! Get rid of the rubbish! He challenged them to deliberately turn away from wrong actions, wrong attitudes, wrong thinking – and to turn towards what was right and good.

As Christians, that challenge is ours also. Of course, we can choose how we spend this waiting period. We can make good use of it, and make sure we are prepared - or we can be slack.

As Jay and I awaited the arrival of our first child, we faced the challenge of making space for her. We lived in a tiny one bedroom cottage. Where would we put the crib? In the end, we took the doors off the wardrobe, and put the crib under Jay's shirts in our bedroom. It worked well. We were prepared.

In our Epistle reading this morning, Peter's message is also very pertinent to us. He says, **But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.**

Peter is basically saying, 'okay - you might think the Lord is slow in returning - but really, in the eternal scheme of things - he's not. See this as an opportunity!' He goes on to say, in v 14, **“ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”** In other words, the patience of the Lord, the delay in his coming, is giving us, and those we love, every opportunity to belong to him, and to honour him with our lives.

This passage challenges us to look within. To ask ourselves, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, if there is anything in our lives that is not pleasing to God. To ask if there is anything in our lives that dishonours him, if there is anything in our lives that has become more important than him. Are we ignoring any of his commandments? Are we putting off anything we know he wants us to do? In short – is there anything we need to repent of? If we become convicted that there is – then repentance, and the accompanying change is what is called for.

3. The third thing this passage brings before us is a wonderful promise – **that of being accepted and empowered by God!**

As the people responded to John's message, confessed their sin and were baptised, John gave them a mind blowing promise. **He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”**

It's hard for us as Christians, who have the Holy Spirit within, to realise the magnitude of this promise to John's audience.

Every Jew knew the stories of Moses and the prophets – and how the H.S. overtook and overpowered them at specific times to carry out God’s work.

Every Jew was in awe of that special place in the temple – the Holy of Holies – where the presence of God resided. Where the high priest alone could enter, and even then, only once a year!

The actual presence of God was something that struck awe and wonder into the heart of the Jew. Yet here – John promised that those who responded to God’s message were baptised in water, would also be baptised by the H.S.

Later, when Paul was writing to the Corinthian Christians, he said,

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”

We lose something in the English translation of this verse. The Greek word for “temple” is *naos*. It doesn’t just mean temple in the general sense. It’s the same word used to describe – guess what? That very special place *within* the temple where the actual presence of God resided, and where the high priest alone could visit once a year – the *Holy of Holies!*

The promise we have as God’s people is that the very presence and power of God himself – the same presence that empowered Moses and the prophets, the same presence that filled and empowered Jesus, now lives in us!

We have become the very holy of holies – the place where God himself dwells. An awesome promise, isn’t it?

So this morning, as we’re reminded that our Lord is coming, let us take seriously God’s call to repentance, and rejoice in his loving presence that he lavishes upon us.

Let’s pray.