

Prepare the way*Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12*

Just when everyone is hoping for something light and fluffy as we approach Christmas (there's about 19 sleeps to go), and, as the Moderator of Presbytery reminded us last week we're all well into contributing to the pension fund of Noddy Holder and Slade's "So here it is, merry Christmas", or Mariah Carey's, "All I want for Christmas", before we even have the Brussel Sprouts on in time for the big day, enter John the Baptist.

John is a bruiser, a spiritual heavyweight in the best traditions of the prophets of Israel. Not simply a voice 'crying in the wilderness', but 'shouting in the wilderness.' Shouting usually implies a measure of complaint, or unhappiness, or warning. We've all heard the words, 'Look out!' ring in our ears. John shouts, because he has a warning to give.

Everything about him suggests a single-minded devotion. He makes his home in the desert so that he won't be seduced by the attractions of the city. His dressing, echoing other Old Testament prophets, is one of rude simplicity. His minimalist diet, like a permanent detox regime, is the food of one for whom meat and drink are a distraction. His real food and drink are to carry out the mission God has given him. Out from the margins of society he comes, a loud voice shouting complaints and warnings to any of his contemporaries who will hear.ⁱ

John may have been like Alexander Whyte, from the late C19th and early C20th, a notable preacher at Free St George's Church, latterly St George's West, in Edinburgh. It was said that Whyte could be so direct and penetrating that to hear him preach was to take your life in your hands.ⁱⁱ

John shouts at the crowds: *"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"*

John shouts at the religious leaders: *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"*

John shouts that the One Who is to come has: *"His winnowing fork...in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

For many this season of Advent in churches has become almost exclusively preparation for Christmas and pondering the meaning of the incarnation, the great truth that in Jesus God is with us in person. We do the Christ-child of Bethlehem, the Man of Nazareth, the crucified One on the Cross, the Saviour beyond the empty tomb, no favours if we focus so much on the Christmas baby and God's love coming down at Christmas, without remembering that this same divine love is fierce in its judgement of those who resist or ignore love's demands. John the Baptist's words warn us that repentance, turning around to face God's searching love, turning away from all sin and bad behaviour in our world, and dealing with the brokenness and hurt and fear all around us, is what is going to matter to God. Trust in God's saving power in Jesus, made real at Christmas, but that trust and faith must move on to action and put into practice. We are called, by John the Baptist, by Jesus, by God, to show what we believe our behaviour, our attitude towards others, our commitment to doing what is right, our determination to leave our world as far as we are able in a better place than when we came into it, is what motivates our lives.

Quoting from an Old Testament prophet called Isaiah, John the Baptist tells his world what he has come to do: to get anyone who would listen to, *"Prepare the way of the Lord...to make His path straight."* Not so that Jesus would find an easy way across the world, but that Jesus would find a way to get to us, to be a part of our lives, to find that we are ready for Him. To believe in Him, and to follow.

However you are preparing for Christmas? Do any of you have on your 'to do' list, 'Prepare for Jesus'? It's beyond the card writing and the food shopping; it's not leaving out a glass of sherry and some shortbread for Him on Christmas Eve (now there's a mixed message!). It is about, is your life, life, our lives, ready for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, the Hope-Giver, the Healer, the Teacher, Forgiver, and Friend.

It's not only Advent, these weeks leading up to Christmas, that is a time of preparation. Historically the Scottish Communion season used to have a service called the Preparatory Service. It's still to be found in some churches in the northwest of our country. A time, usually on the Friday night before the Communion Sunday, where the congregation gathered in Church, to prepare itself communally, and individually, for the awesome privilege of encountering Jesus. A prayer:

*"Blessed God, Whose love is unchanging...Thou art bidding us to Thy Table...help us...to approach Thine altar with hearts prepared for the blessings Thou hast in store...Thou has prepared our way before us...Most holy God: if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, Thou art faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness...Our hearts condemn us, but Thou art greater than our heart and Thy mercies are infinite...As Jesus stands among us in His risen power, let Him make Himself known to all in the breaking of bread."*ⁱⁱⁱ

Prepare the way, so that you might come to Jesus, and that He might come to you. For all that the word 'Repent' jars on our self-satisfied and sophisticated ears, yet at its root is its meaning to turn. Change the direction of your living - that's what John the Baptist was shouting about. Instead of the relentless pursuit of your own agenda, turn to the God Who is coming very near.

Have you prepared yourself to take communion, for this living reminder that in bread and wine we encounter Jesus, spiritually, directly, personally?

Or is there something that you need to sort out? Some argument with a friend. Some unkind words to a loved one. Some laziness of habit. Some taking for granted. Some corner-cutting action that might endanger everything at work. Some malicious thought. Something that you know, or others might know, but definitely you know that it is not right. And you need to fix it, and say sorry for it, and sort it out. *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"* Turn around, sort out your life. At home, at work. At school, or college, or university. In the Church. With a family member, or a colleague, or a friend. Prepare the way so that you can come to Jesus, because Jesus is coming to you.

You might not have time to fix it right this very moment, but Jesus will meet you halfway. Take the bread, take the wine, place yourself into His hands as He places Himself into Yours, and when you leave this Church - today, or next week, sort yourself out. Prepare the way.

Your life might be pretty good at the moment. Things may be smooth and going your way. But you know that there's that little something, that small dark corner, hidden away, that needs to be dealt with, and sorted out. Repent, turn around, prepare the way. Ask for help. Jesus is coming.

Your life might be as bleak as the wilderness where John the Baptist preached. Hard and inhospitable, broken and full of bad things that you have done or been, or that others have done and been to you. You do not need to live like that. You do not need to live with it. Repent, turn around, prepare the way. Ask for help. Jesus is coming.

Advent preparation matters, so that we can prepare ourselves for the coming birth of Jesus. Communion preparation matters, so that we can prepare ourselves for the forgiving love of Jesus. It matters, because we matter. It matters, because Jesus, and what He stands for, and what He expects from us, matters also.

John the Baptist specifically called his nation, his people, his leaders to reconsider and to repent. Could John the Baptist be calling to our nation, our people, our leaders, to change our ways. Not just the headline people towards whom our fingers point; but the small print people, like you and me.

Prepare the way, that when we get ready, we may find our lives are not as hopeless as we thought. Repent is in truth a hopeful word, because in the turning around, we believe that change is possible.

God did not wait till the world was ready; God did not wait for the perfect time; God came when the need was deep and great.^{iv}

Prepare the way, and walk with Jesus. Today. This week.

Now.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fisher, *But I Say To You*, pps22-23

ⁱⁱ John Kelman, *The Best of Alexander Whyte*, p26

ⁱⁱⁱ *Book of Common Order 1928, Order For A Service Of Preparation for Holy Communion*, pps52-55

^{iv} Madeleine L'Engele, *First Coming*, in *'The Ordering of Love, the New Collected Poems of Madeleine L'Engele'*