

Reflection – Second Sunday of Advent
10-12-2023
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

- Isaiah 40: 1-11 Prepare the way of the Lord
- Psalms 85: 1-2, 8-13 The Lord's salvation is near to those who fear Him.
- 2 Peter 3: 8-15a The Lord is patient and loving,
but a new Heaven and Earth will come.
- Mark 1: 1-8 Ministry of John the Baptist - "Prepare the way of the Lord."

Introduction

Good Morning Everyone, and welcome to worship, on this the second Sunday of Advent.

The Advent season is a time set aside in our church calendar to prepare, both for the celebration of Christmas, and also, for when Jesus will come again.

Today I would like to focus in on our sentence from scripture, originally from the prophet Isaiah, and then used in the Gospels to depict the work, words and actions of John the Baptist.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. For the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together."

And I would like to explore the "What", the "Why", the "When" and the "How" of this sentence of scripture, in light of all of today's readings from the Bible.

Prepare the Way – What?

Let's begin by looking at the "What" of "Preparing the Way".

What are we preparing the way for?

It's the twofold theme of Advent that we are preparing for. Firstly, we're preparing to celebrate Christmas, when Jesus came into the world as a human like us, and secondly, we are preparing for when Jesus will come again.

The "What" is quite straightforward. Christianity is unique among the world's religions in that Jesus not only claimed to be a great teacher or healer, but he also claimed to be God. So, Jesus is the, "What" we are preparing the way for.

At Advent we are preparing the way, to celebrate Jesus' birth, in what we as Christians call the incarnation, God becoming one of us, for us. And we are looking forward to when Jesus will return, as he promised that he would.

Prepare the Way – Why?

Let's look next at the "Why". Why do we need Jesus?

In Mark's gospel reading today we hear:-

"John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

The simple answer to the "Why" of "Preparing the Way" is sin.

The fact that we as human beings, have come up with the word "Sin" indicates that it is significant, and I think it is an intrinsic part of our human nature.

And if we sin, we need forgiveness.

But sin is a very poorly understood word in our contemporary world. It is often associated with things that are good. For example, I've heard it said, "That dessert was so good it was sinful." But sin is not good, and sin is bad for us. Some people characterize sin as only something to be associated with people who are really bad, like maybe those in jail. And whilst it is true, that people often end up in jail as a result of sinful behaviour, this way of looking at it is not often helpful either, because it minimizes or even justifies a lot of other bad behaviour.

A better way of looking at sin might be to explain it as doing things our own way, and not God's way. And the bible makes it clear that we all do that. Even the best of us, are guilty of wanting our own way, or doing things our own way, at times.

And that is why forgiveness of sin is such a positive thing.

Why else would people have flocked out into the desert to see, a strange preacher, who wore strange clothes and ate strange food? John the Baptist was telling people that they could be forgiven, and it was a message that the people were keen to embrace.

If we have hurt someone we love, by our own actions, then we will usually want to be reconciled with them, and seek forgiveness. This is true also of our relationship with God. But unless we first acknowledge that we sin, we will not know or feel that we are in desperate need of forgiveness. We need to prepare the way for Jesus, because it is only by repenting, and accepting what Jesus has done for us in his life, death and resurrection, that we can truly know God's forgiveness in our lives.

Jesus is the best thing for our lives. I see in our society people searching for the good life. They fill their lives with all sorts of things which are not necessarily bad, like career's and houses and relationships, but ultimately these things can never fully satisfy our deepest need. Our deepest need is to be reconciled to God through the forgiveness of our sins, and the way to this forgiveness is Jesus.

Prepare the Way – When?

Let's now explore the "When" of "Preparing the Way".

The short answer, of when to prepare the way, is "Now". If we have not accepted Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, then the best time to do that is "Now".

But we also hear in the second letter of Peter this morning:-

"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."

So, whilst we need to be preparing the way for Jesus now, we know that Jesus will come again at some time in the future.

This is a great challenge for some people. They see the state of the world and they want Jesus back again, "now". As Christians though, the bible tells us, we don't know when Jesus will come again.

We know God's timing does not always match our expectations. The writers of the Bible had a much clearer view of God, than I think we do, at times. Because we live in a very secular society, I think we often view things in human terms, rather than in Godly terms. In Peter's second letter today we hear:-

"With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years."

If we lift our eyes to the heavenly plane and embrace the awesomeness of God, then preparing the way for Jesus will not be a point in time, but rather a way of life.

Peter also tells us today that, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief". We don't know when, but we do know we need to be prepared.

If we truly grasp who Jesus is, then the "When" of preparing the way will not only be just "now", but it will be an integral part of our whole lives, so that we will be ready when Jesus returns.

Prepare the Way – How?

Finally, let's look at the "How" of "Preparing the Way".

The analogy given in the reading from Isaiah is that of creating a straight highway. Valleys are to be filled, and mountains are to be made low. As a civil engineer I like this analogy. A straight highway is easy to visualize. I recall working on the construction of a bridge between Townsville and Bowen. The previous bridge at the Elliot River was quite narrow, and down close to the river bed. There was a steep decline in and out of the crossing. To navigate it safely you had to really slow down, and it was quite scary if a semi was coming the other way. After we built the new bridge, the river was very easy to drive over. In fact, the bridge was at the same

height as the road either side of the river, so if you didn't look out to the sides you wouldn't even know that you were driving over a bridge, the road just went straight across.

We are called to prepare the way for Jesus into our lives, and into the lives of others, like this. In Psalm 85 today we hear:-

“For righteousness shall go before him: and tread the path before his feet.”

If we know that our sin cuts us off from God, and we know that in Jesus we can be restored to a right relationship with God, then we will want to follow Jesus in our lives, and we should be wanting to make it as easy as possible for others to also know and embrace this Good News.

The “how” in preparing the way is “following Jesus”. And when ask how best to live, Jesus gave the response, “Love God, Love your neighbour as yourself.” Jesus is of course the prime example, of how as humans, we can live our best life, but often we need other people physically around us who help us in living God's way. In the second letter of Peter today we hear these words:-

“leading lives of holiness and godliness” and “strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish.”

When we see others living like this we can be encouraged. When we seek to live like this, we can encourage others.

This week I received the news that Yvonne Brand, a former parishioner, who had moved into a care facility, had died. I did not know Yvonne, but I immediately received two emails from current parishioners about the many ministries that Yvonne had been involved in within the life of the parish. Yvonne's life had obviously had an impact on others, within the life of this faith community.

As Christians we are all called to take our part in the life and work, of God's church like Yvonne did. We are all different, but we are all called to take our part in creating as best we can around us, “Heaven on Earth”.

Conclusion

So today, as we continue our Advent journey, we are called to prepare the way.

In doing this, we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world as the infant in the Bethlehem stable, but we also prepare for the second coming, and what eternity might mean for us.

I pray that we will all continue, each in our own way, to prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight, as we live in the expectation of his return. Amen.