

## 5<sup>th</sup> December 2021 – Second Sunday of Advent

About 8 years ago, Colin and I were travelling in China and all over the country were great road building projects. It was obvious that the Chinese government putting billions into its plan was to rebuild the ancient silk road as a trade route and improve transportation throughout the country. So, huge earth moving machines were brought in and paths, which had been used by nothing bigger than horse and cart for millennia were turned into 21st century motorways. Cuttings were driven through mountains and colossal bridges of concrete and steel, or sometimes famously, of glass, spanned valleys a mile wide. It was a vast project to improve transport links within China and with surrounding countries. Tragically, some of those bridges have already collapsed.

But it does give us some idea of the size of the project John was imagining. 'Prepare the way of the Lord. Make the way straight – every valley shall be lifted up and the mountains brought low and the rough places smooth.' Those weren't John's own words. He was re-imagining words Isaiah had spoken about the Israelites exiled to Babylon around 600 years earlier. Then, the words had referred to God's preparations for the Israelites to return home. God would make a straight way through the wilderness for King Cyrus who would release the Israelites from captivity and they would return home with singing along that same path. John the Baptist recognised that Isaiah's words gained a new meaning in his time for the inhabitants of Judah.

'Prepare!' says John the Baptist. 'Get ready!' And wasn't the sort of putting up the tree up and ordering turkey or vegan wreath preparations. John was calling for something greater than that, something earth shattering, for people to respond to his words and way of life by radically reshaping the way they lived. That is a project greater than the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon, far greater than the Chinese road building project. John was demanding a change of heart and lifestyle.

When the people asked what they should actually do to prepare the way of the Messiah, as they did, a few verses later on, his answer was specific and practical. He told those with two tunics to give to those who had none. He told tax collectors to be honest, and soldiers not to be exploitative, 'Be generous, be honest, don't be manipulative.'<sup>1</sup> Those apparently insignificant changes in unimportant lives were the signs of repentance which could cut valleys through mountains, and span valleys with bridges and make a way for the Messiah.

John's demand 'Prepare the way' might sound grandiose, but like all great works, the way is built of honesty and attention and dedication. It requires commitment, acts of selflessness and unobtrusive kindnesses. It is built of love.

The extract from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians which we heard celebrates the overflowing love, knowledge and insight which fifteen or so years later had become characteristic of Christians and was demonstrated in the lives of very new Christians in Thessalonica.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 3, 11-14

But Advent is not just a pre-Christmas celebration of love and salvation. It is deeper and darker than that. Our Gospel reading refers to some significant names – Pontius Pilate, Herod, Annas and Caiphas. All four would play a crucial role in Christ's trial, condemnation and death. John the Baptist's requirements are so deceptively easy and straightforward, be generous, be honest, be selfless, that there is no excuse for failing to comply. But as those four demonstrated, we do fail, all of us, repeatedly.

That's where judgement comes in. Traditionally as we wait in Advent we ponder the four last things – death, judgement, heaven and hell. Today, the second Sunday of Advent our focus is on Judgement. John the Baptist promises, 'All flesh shall see the salvation of God.' But, as Malachi warns, we can't bear the presence of God. 'Who can endure the day of his coming?' he asks, 'And who can stand when he appears? For he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.' The image is of Christ sitting in judgement on his throne burning away our imperfections with fire as we are seen for what we really are. We are preparing not only for the birth of the Christ child, but also for the return of the crucified, resurrected Christ.

'Prepare the way of the Lord....and all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.' For Isaiah's audience those words promised a return from exile to their promised land. John the Baptist's audience heard a call to repentance and to acts of love in preparation for the coming of Christ.

Today we hear the call again. 'Prepare the way of the Lord.' For each of us the response required will be different. So what, in terms of prayer or action do we need to do to make ourselves ready to see the salvation of our God?