

Advent 2 Matthew 3:1-12

Well, here we are at Week 2 of Advent and for most of us our Christmas preparations will now be well and truly underway. Preparation is the keyword at the moment and there is an awful lot to do. There are cards to write, particularly if you have to get some sent overseas, there is gift shopping to plan and undertake, there is food to purchase and prepare.

As we think of food, there have been some who would suggest that prior to Christmas we ought to prepare our bodies, too. Most of us find the Christmas season a time for overindulgence and some people try to lose a few kilos in advent in preparations, it's something to think about as we often enjoy things a little better if we've had to work to achieve them!

And, of course, as Christians, there are all sorts of things we can do for some spiritual preparation. One such idea is to have an advent candle, one of those with numbers 1-24 listed down it and you burn one number away each day. A beautiful ritual to light it over dinner to remind ourselves of the light of Christ ever present and to give us the opportunity to focus on that each day.

The more traditional advent aid may be the chocolate advent calendar especially if you have children at home, but this too can be an opportunity to be reminded day by day that not only is Christmas coming, but that we have things to do in order to prepare for it.

Of course, spiritual preparation must include an element of prayer and scripture and the collect for this week is a reminder that the scriptures themselves give us all we need to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Within them we find details of the prophecies of Jesus, stories full of moral guidance on how to live our lives. We have the words of Jesus himself in the gospels with his parables and teachings to inspire us and we have characters in the bible whose sole purpose is to lead us to Jesus, to help us prepare. One of the most famous of these is John the Baptist who features heavily in our advent devotions.

John the Baptist took on the established religious authorities in the form of the Pharisees and Sadducees because he could see that they lived their lives by the book. They kept to the letter of the Hebrew Bible, but inwardly their motivations left a lot to be desired. It was all about how they were seen in society, status and power and not about living in humble obedience to God. We hear about it this morning as John challenges them at the Jordan river and we know that Jesus challenged them many times in his ministry for the very same reason.

We, too should be challenged by John's message. We start getting ready for Christmas during Advent. We continue to come to church; we often frown upon the increased commercialisation of Christmas in the rest of society and the loss of the true meaning of Christmas. And it's easy to fool ourselves into thinking that compared with everyone else we are getting ready in the proper way, we are putting Christ first without any real and specific repentance.

We are reading the scriptures and looking for what it is we must do to be ready, we know the Christmas story off by heart. But that is not the case for everyone anymore. . Hopefully we can help to remind people with our carol services, our Christmas devotions and our witness in the community. Some people really have no idea what Christmas is but

we are not like these people, we understand all too well the true meaning of Christmas, the fact that Jesus is the reason for the season.

But, we shouldn't be comparing ourselves with everyone else, we should be comparing ourselves with how we were last year. We should be striving to continually improve ourselves and shape ourselves to the purpose of God so that we can be acceptable in his sight.

And in the same way that John, for the first time, told the Jews that the Messiah is not ONLY coming for them and that their links with Abraham are not enough. They actually have to DO something to prepare for Christ. So it remains for us. A full understanding of the nativity is not enough. A word for word recollection of the Bible is not enough. Learning is only worth doing if it goes beyond the academic. The Bible is there for our instruction but we must learn from it and live by it.

I don't think we can ever do enough to thank God or acknowledge His great deeds. He offered Jesus to us to be born a vulnerable baby and grow up to educate people about God, to minister to those around him as a servant and ultimately to be persecuted and to die on that cross in order that he could save us from our sins. I don't think we can do nearly enough considering what God does for us.

But God doesn't ask us to re-pay his goodness, he just wants us to be ready to meet him face to face. And in order to prepare ourselves we need to look inwards and really, honestly examine ourselves and our behaviours so we constantly strive to BE better and DO better for God. Where we find fault we need to remember John's message of repentance. God is ever merciful and forgiving so we need not fear apologising to him and asking for his help to guide us on the right path in the future.

We, like those people being baptised by John, can find it difficult to get our priorities right all of the time but by taking stock of our lives we can begin to prepare ourselves.

Perhaps God is glad that we are so busy at Christmas. The effort we put in to celebrating Jesus' birth is evidence of how important that is for us. But at this busy time, more so because it is busy, we need to remember our own personal preparations and our own spiritual needs, it's so easy to put ourselves last in the hustle and bustle.

God wants us to be prepared for Christ this Christmas and throughout our lives. And God will help us to achieve this if we can only find the space to allow it.