

Advent 2 Luke 3:1-6

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.

Many of us will find this month follows a similar pattern; cards to write, international ones first, gifts to think about, purchase and wrap and decorations around the house to prepare. Once all of that is done it's the food to get bought and prepared and then we will be nearly there.

Of course, as Christians, many of us will have been doing some spiritual preparations also. One way of doing that might be with an advent candle which shows the numbers 1-24 and you burn one number away each day. It could be lit over dinner as a reminder of the light of Christ ever present and to give an opportunity to focus on that each day. In houses with children there is likely to be some type of advent calendar. There are all sorts of calendars available, but chocolate is always a favourite!

Advent is a time for Christians to reflect on how we might prepare for not only the celebrations of the historic coming of Christ but also for the second coming of Christ foretold to us. We may find that concept difficult but in fact 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.

Now is not the time to go too deeply into the role of John the Baptist as we'll be coming onto him more fully later in advent. But it is worth pointing out that although we are striving to live our lives by the Bible, John 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.

And this can be a problem for Christians today. 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. Our society is increasingly secular and for many, the Christmas story is barely heard, let alone understood. Hopefully we can help to remind people with our various church led carol services. 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.

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.

We can never do enough to thank God or acknowledge God's great deeds. God 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. We cannot do nearly enough considering what God does for us.

But God doesn't ask us to re-pay this goodness, God 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 and asking for help to guide us on the right path in the future.

That's the beauty of God's prophets and their prophecies, they are not crystal ball predictions of one time only events, but rather they speak of the nature of God and his relationship with humanity, and in this way they are written for each of us. God's guidance in his written word, the bible, is for one and all. Malachi's words of warning and invitation to repentance are as much for you and I as they were for his contemporaries. The song of Zachariah foretells the coming of God's glory as much for our benefit as for anyone else. Even John the Baptist's call to prepare the way for the Lord rings as true today as it did all those years ago along the banks of the Jordan river.

The world seems to be changing faster than ever, technology has moved on, new disputes between nations are bubbling just on the surface, people in some parts of the world are wealthier than ever, others live in the same abject poverty as there ever was. But the really important stuff of life is unchanged, God is in the midst of our life, caring, celebrating, grieving, inspiring, guiding all those who make space for him. Our relationship with God is what resolves much of what bothers us, making that relationship better, therefore, is something we can all strive for and making it possible is what Jesus did through his birth, life, death and resurrection

May we all hear the prophets' words afresh this year and heed them going forward so we are ready when we come to see the Lord face to face.