

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*
SUNDAY SERMON

*Prepare For The "way Of The Lord", Advent 2
Delivered by Rev'd Stephen Monsieigneur on the 8th December 2019*

Today we begin the second week of Advent – and a time of continued preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus and revel in the anticipation of His Second Coming.

In today's gospel we here John the Baptizer, who prepared Judea for the first coming of Jesus, telling us how to prepare for the coming of Jesus in this Holy Season.

'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' ^(Matthew 3:3)

This instruction to 'prepare the way of the Lord'; is important, it exists not only in today's sentence from Mark, or the reading from Isaiah but throughout the calls of Old Testament prophets and the Gospel's.

But what is 'the way of the lord'?

How do we prepare for Him?

The 'way of the Lord' is the way of God, the ways and precepts taught to us by Jesus through His work and in His life.

Proverbs [10:29] tell us that 'the way of the Lord' is a refuge for those who are following the teachings of Jesus, as well as a place of safety for those are marginalized, rejected by society or lost.

In the season of Advent, the start of the church year, we reset our clocks to the beginning: the birth of Jesus.

We relearn what it is like to be Jews, waiting for the Messiah. Now such an experience is confronting and the temptation is to be superficial in our commitment. It is for this reason we journey together, as a church, because alone, we are not capable of doing it fully or well. Through this journey, together we are able to realign our thinking and actions to be more Christ-like.

We come together to help each other remember the birth of the 'Prince of Peace' -- and all that birth means, to help us better understand and follow His teaching and to spread then to all the world.

Given the degree of uncertainty and discord currently felt around the world this need could hardly be more discernible. But meeting it must start with each of us – we cannot change the minds and hearts of others until our own minds and hearts are changed.

Thomas Merton said in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

Instead of hating the people you think are war-makers, hate the appetites and disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things in yourself, not in another.

"Hate" seems a rather strong word here, unless we apply to ourselves that familiar phrase, "Love the sinner. Hate the sin." Now, That's never as easy as it sounds. To conform oneself more fully to Christ, there is much to be unlearned, disowned. To approach Isaiah's vision of a peaceable kingdom, each of us must change.

The coarse and ugly bickering of those we look to for leadership that frequently fills our news, the targeting of difference as a source of fear, is causing dissention and alienation; I see and hear it in the faces and voices of those who ask me, as a priest, what they are to do.

I've heard many expressions of fear, disillusionment, and anger from ALL demographics.

Some people fear that the world as they know it is disappearing before their very eyes and they don't know what to do about it. Others worry about the stability of the future.

Many vent anger at those they see as the cause, often at those who are different or seen as weaker; the refugee, the person of different faith, the very structure of our society itself.

Just look at the rapid development of the extinction Rebellion movement, the growth around the world of nationalism, or the incidents of racial hate such as that against a young father and his children on a train here in Brisbane last week.

There is a problem and we cannot deny it. The disparity between the haves and the have not's is growing. It seems that everyone is angry about something. What must concern us is our willingness as followers of Jesus to accept these changes.

This anger increases our susceptibility to disillusionment and ultimately hate. We must refuse to accept it.

The ideal of 'justice or a fair go for all' has been succeeded to the admiration for money, sex, power and materialism – Just look at the rise in populist politics where people are attracted to the person promising easy wealth and reward. Where overt discrimination against those 'who are not like us'; is used to bolster support, where talks of registries and deportations make everyone feel uneasy, whether they are a member of the 'chosen' group or not.

How different are we from the pharisees and Sadducees who believed they were saved simply by being descendants of Abraham?

How different are we from the society dominated by the culture of power, greed and division into which Jesus was born?

What do those of us who claim to follow Christ do in this time and place of radical change and nagging uncertainty? We must remember that Isaiah told us of the coming of one who will deliver true justice and uncommon peace.

But when the prophet cries,-- prepare a way for the Lord, we are prone to panic.

We write shopping lists, and head to the store for the treasures we must surely present. We survey with dread the mess of a heart we must clean up for the holy visitor.

But after all the cleansing the house is still just our little place.

The Gift is not to be found in any market.

We fear our unpreparedness, our failure to adequately repent, still rushing, still dusting this and hiding that. But the Spirit speaks softly; we are not asked to clean the house for the weekend to impress the Unexpected Guest.

We are asked to prepare a room and set a place at the table for the rest of our lives for the Beloved, the child who already dwells within.

That's the good news: Jesus' way must come again through you and me. Each day can be a glorious day of Jesus' coming if we live it in our hearts and lives. Prepare your heart, prepare your world, prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare, for Jesus is coming.

So, what can we do to 'prepare the way of the lord' right now?

In this environment, how do we begin the process of preparing for the birth of Jesus, heeding the admonition of Matthew 3:3.

Let us start with our own hearts and minds.

Who do each of us find offensive? the arrogant, the gender divers person of the Muslim or other non-Christian.

Reflect on this and find your own prejudice, fears and angers and own them.

Then in small, steady ways yourself, act. Knock down the walls of your own failings, your own pride and prejudice.

Prepare the way for God, who comes bringing justice and liberation through the Messiah. Above all, give love and forgiveness and joy freely to all you meet from family to friends and to the stranger.

Let us embrace difference as a way of God being heard by the other instead of fearing difference. Let us Lift up those sunk by despair.

How will each of us prepare for the way of the lord?

How can we poor faltering mortals prepare the way of the lord?

Because the Holy Spirit will help us. We need only ask.

I leave you with these thoughts from Thomas Merton's 'Thoughts in Solitude':

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Go and prepare the way of the Lord.

Amen.