

All Around the Altar Talk - Andrea Ward

Sunday, 6th December
2nd Sunday of Advent

Reflection Time - Introducing the Theme

I want to begin this morning by getting us to think about three questions.

Questions:

- 1) Imagine that you've got a test / exam (if in school) or an interview coming up. You want to do your best - so what do you need to do to prepare?
- 2) Imagine that the Queen is coming to visit your home next week. How are you going to prepare to welcome her to your home?
- 3) Christmas Day is in 19 days time. What kind of things do you need to do to make sure you're prepared for the big day?

Your answers?

There are important things that we need to do to be prepared and ready for an exam or interview, for if the Queen was visiting us, for Christmas. And there are possible consequences of *not* being prepared:

Exam - can't answer the questions; don't do our best; get a result below our ability;
Interview - we don't give ourselves the best chance of getting the job

Queen's visit - being very embarrassed! The Queen thinks you're rude.

Christmas - don't enjoy as much; no Christmas lunch; no guests. Embarrassed because you haven't got presents for other people.

Today is the 2nd Sunday of Advent

Advent is a time of preparing, getting ready. Preparing for Christmas (even if it is a rather different Christmas this year) and to celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, but Advent is also a time for thinking about being prepared for the day he returns as a glorious King.

This morning we're thinking about "Preparations".

Bible Reading: Mark 1:1-8

Talk

We were thinking earlier about how important it is that we make sure that we're well prepared for significant events, including being well prepared for Christmas and our celebrations of the birth of Jesus.

The first chapter of Mark's gospel is all about preparations!

"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

'I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will *prepare your way* -
'a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
"*Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.*"

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness..." *From Mark 1:1-4*

It's traditional on the Second Sunday of Advent to remember John the Baptist. The man God sent to be a messenger to prepare the way for Jesus the Messiah.

But John wasn't preparing people for the *birth* of Jesus. Can you remember how much older John was than Jesus? His mother, Elizabeth, was 6 months pregnant with John when Mary, newly pregnant with Jesus, visited her. John and Jesus were of a very similar age.

So, John was preparing people to meet the adult Jesus. Jesus was just about to start his ministry of teaching and healing.

But I wonder why God needed to send John as a messenger to prepare the way for Jesus? I wonder if you can think of what difference it would have made if John hadn't prepared the way for Jesus?

1) Normally at Christmas, in Primary schools, you'd have been preparing to put on a Christmas play for your parents to come and see. Sadly, this year we can't do that. But imagine putting all that effort into learning your lines and rehearsing, and the time comes when you're all ready to present your play. Great! But how are you going to make sure that your parents are there to watch on the big day? Of course! You need to tell them that it's happening, you need to design a leaflet with all the details and give it to them!

When we plan an important event, we start telling people weeks if not months ahead of the event taking place, because we want to make sure that everyone knows to put it in their diary and to come. In the same way, God wanted people to know that Jesus was coming, so he sent John as a messenger to tell people all about him. There was no social media or internet, so John just got out there and called out to people to tell them about the One who was coming!

2) God wanted people to get excited about Jesus. He wanted people to have a sense of anticipation about him coming. John was a great preacher but he wanted people to get excited about an even greater preacher than himself:

And this was his message: 'After me comes the one more *powerful than I*, the straps of *whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie*. I baptise you with *water*, but he will baptise you with the *Holy Spirit*.'

3) But there was an even more important way in which John had come to prepare the people. What was his message again?

“Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.”

Let's imagine the Queen is coming to Chatham. Do you think the local council / leaders would just leave it to chance that on the day, the Queen's car will be able to arrive and reach its destination without any problems? No! I don't think they're going to risk her Majesty getting stuck in a big local traffic jam. They'll prepare carefully for the day. Important roads will be blocked off and traffic diverted; and what's more, I bet that any big pot-holes in the road would be filled in, and the streets cleaned of any rubbish, so the way is made clear for the arrival of the Queen's car.

It used to be a bit like that in the days of the bible. If a King was due to visit a place, they sometimes built a special processional road or highway for his arrival, removing obstacles and making it smooth. The people wanted their King to feel welcomed! That's what the prophet Isaiah who John quoted was thinking about, when he said “Make straight paths for him!”

But John wasn't thinking about a literal, physical road. It was a picture for something else. John was talking about preparing our hearts - making the way in our heart ready for Jesus.

“And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan.”

How do we make a straight path in our hearts? Through repentance, saying sorry to God for the things we've done that are wrong and that hurt God and hurt ourselves and others. Receiving his forgiveness.

So, thinking of our image of making a straight path for Jesus:

Perhaps we need to clear out any rubbish or obstacles in ourselves that makes it difficult for Jesus to enter our hearts? Are there any things that we're doing or thinking that don't make Jesus feel very welcome to enter? We can tell God about them and ask Him to forgive us, and then we need to decide not to give any space to those things in our hearts anymore.

Perhaps a bit like a road that is very busy and congested, our hearts can become very busy and congested with all sorts of things that are stopping us from letting Jesus in. Things that in themselves might be good, but we've them made more important in our lives than Jesus or they're distracting us from him. Maybe Jesus has dropped down the list of our priorities.

One more image: When your car goes down a pot-hole, particularly a bad one, you know all about it! It's bad for your car and it's very uncomfortable for you. I wonder if there are some pot-holes in our hearts that might give Jesus a bumpy ride? Large pot-holes are a sign that roads aren't being regularly maintained and looked after. I wonder how we can make sure that we're looking after our heart regularly, so the way for Jesus in our heart is smooth and we're not giving him a bumpy, uncomfortable ride? Regular

times of prayer, reading the Bible, worshipping, taking time with him are all ways of helping to keep our hearts well-looked after and ready for Jesus.

John the Baptist called out to the people: "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."

God sent John to get everyone ready and prepared for Jesus, their Messiah and King. God didn't want anyone to miss out on receiving the best news they could possibly experience: His own Son coming among them with his liberating, healing life and presence.

In this season of Advent and as we prepare to celebrate once again the coming of Jesus into our world, God wants each of us to be prepared and ready in our hearts to welcome and experience his wonderful Son. And God longs for us to receive and experience His Son, not just on Christmas day, of course, but today, tomorrow, and every day.

So, I invite each of us to take time in the coming days and weeks to prepare the way for our Lord and make straight the paths of our hearts.