

PREPARE THE WAY

(Isaiah 40.1-9 and Mark 1.1-8)

They're all at it.

- Wyevale Garden centre (which we all still know as Peter Barrett's) are at it.
- The management of the Wilson Centre are at it.
- Our children here at St. Mary's are at it.
- Even Prince Harry and Meghan Markle are at it.

At what you ask?

They are all getting ready for something. They are all preparing.

Peter Barrett's started preparing for their Christmas sales at the beginning of September by making sure that to get to what you really want you have to go through 200 yards of Christmas goodies (You've been there haven't you!).

The people at the Wilson Centre have organised for the first time an external Christmas tree and its light and carol singers for a celebration on 15th December and are busy preparing for that.

Our children are putting on a presentation at our carol service and are preparing for that by making their props. and rehearsing what they will do. Prince Harry and Meghan Markle are preparing for their spring wedding.

Isaiah was at it too.

John the Baptist was at it as well.

We sometimes wonder how the Old Testament connects with the New. If you have ever waded through Ezekiel as I have done in my recent Bible reading, the question is particularly in point – try reading Ezekiel sometime!

But in today's reading we have a complete connection. In our reading from Isaiah 40 we heard: *The voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord.* And in our reading from Mark we find a quote from Malachi and then that quotation from Isaiah: *The voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord.* And then Mark tells us: *And so John appeared in the wilderness.*

Isaiah goes on with those encouraging and prophetic words:

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground will become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people will see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

If those words sound rather familiar it is because they form part of Handel's wonderful oratorio, Messiah.

Isaiah is telling us about the coming of Jesus. John the Baptist is telling us about the coming of Jesus too.

Mark tells us that *The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him* (V5). That's an awful lot of people. Did you watch (I guess many of you did) a recent BBC TV programme inspired by the 70th wedding anniversary of our Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. They took us back to their wedding in 1947 and I was struck by the crowds which lined their route to and from Westminster Abbey and then breaking through the cordon to rush through the gates of Buckingham Palace. Was it a bit like that by the River Jordan 2000+ years ago? *The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem*. It must have been quite something.

For the Queen's wedding they came because here was a beautiful princess and a handsome naval officer and an elegant wedding and a relief from post-war austerity. But why? Why did they flock to see John the Baptist?

Partly perhaps because he was such an odd-ball - on a really weird diet and rigged out in an itchy dress. But mainly, I think, because what he had to say rang bells with them - loud bells!

These country folk and the sophisticated people of Jerusalem all knew their bible - our Old Testament. That's what they had been taught at their synagogues and by the teachers of the law. That's what they had grown up with. They knew about the Messiah that Isaiah and other prophets had said would come. And here was John telling them to get ready for him to arrive - imminently!

Isaiah talks about people being weak, like grass withering and flowers fading, so too John focuses on people's failures and calls on them to prepare by turning aside from their wrongdoing to be able properly to welcome the Messiah. To smarten up before Jesus the Messiah arrives. He uses the word *repentance* to describe that process.

Ah yes, repentance! What do we know about repentance? Well, how about this?

There was once a dishonest painter who used to water down his paint so it would go further; though he would, of course, charge his customers as if the full strength of the paint had been used. One day it all went wrong. He added too much water so that the finished work looked so bad that even the most short-sighted customer would notice it. *What can I do now*, he wailed. Immediately from above came a loud voice: *Repaint and thin no more!*

Repentance is, in essence, making a change. John the Baptist was urging people to change, to do things differently, to do something new. This is Advent Sunday when we look forward to celebrating our Messiah's arrival on earth in the most humble circumstances and also look forward to his return in glory.

How can we, along with Peter Barrett's and the rest be AT IT – making preparations? What can we, each of us, do that's different, that's new, that's special, this Advent as we prepare for our Jesus' birthday? Let me share a few ideas.

Idea No. 1

This Advent, resolve prayerfully to do something new and different in the New Year – something you have never done or experienced before. Perhaps:

- Find out about a Charity you have not supported before. Is it one which God wants you to help either by prayer or by cash or both?
- Go to Praise and Prayer on the last Sunday in January and experience what it has to offer.
- Join a Homegroup. You will have something to offer it and it will have something to offer you.
- Have prayer (for absolutely anything) in the Londonderry Chapel after a service with two understanding and loving people.

Idea no. 2

I will ask Steven to put in the pew sheet for the next three Sundays, or in a supplement, some special Advent prayers. If you find them helpful, incorporate them in your daily prayers.

Idea no. 3

To celebrate Jesus' birthday. Make God a present of one of the gifts and abilities he has given you. Every single one of us here has God-given gifts and one of the wonderful things about St. Mary's is that those gifts are so much in evidence. But there are gifts which are still needed and are not used. As an example, at Prayer and Praise last Sunday evening, Kath Snowdon talked about the children's work here and the need for one or two more helpers. One of the remarkable things about God is that he will make the very best of any ability or talent you give him however small you think it is and however backward you feel in coming forward to offer it. Have a word with John Lambert or Paul Clayton or me about what you might offer.

Idea no.4

The last reading in our carol service, as is traditional, will be from the first chapter of St. John's gospel and we will hear these words: *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and, though the world was made by him, the world did not recognise him.* Let's bring that a bit closer to home.

The true light that gives light was coming into Stockton on Tees and Long Newton but many in Stockton on Tees and Long Newton did not recognise him.

You and I know that that is the case: so why not ask someone you know who does not know Jesus, the light of the world, to come along with you to the Carol Service on 17th December (mention that a bishop will be speaking) or the Gift Service next week or the 'Midnight' service at 11.30 pm on Christmas Eve. Tell them you will call for them. Pray about who to invite, tell whoever you invite that you have been praying about them. Then pray that at that service the Holy Spirit will be at work and something will strike a chord with them which will make them want to know more about this Jesus who was

born in humility but whose birth, life and death were the best thing that ever happened for Stockton on Tees, Long Newton and the world.

So, let's get *at it*. And let's not be half-hearted like the new Christian who wrote to the Inland Revenue 'I can't sleep at night, so I am enclosing £100 that I forgot to declare. P.S. If I still can't sleep, I will send the rest'

Let's pray:

Loving God,

We praise you again for this season of Advent, this time of preparation and challenge.

We praise you that, in fulfilment of your eternal purpose:

You came to our world in Christ, revealing the extent of your love, showing us the way to life, allowing us to know you for ourselves.

Please open our hearts to respond to your love.

Amen.