

## Third Sunday of Advent

*John 1.6-8, 19-28*

### ***Advent Preparation***

So we come to the third Sunday of Advent, and the fast-approaching tsunami that is Christmas towers over us, getting ready to break with its great tidings of gladness and joy. I hope your preparations are going well! I suppose I am typical of many husbands when I say that my role in family preparations for Christmas tends to take the form of the occasional enquiry to my wife about the state of play – have we sent a card or a present to so-and so-that enquiry to met with a patient smile and the reply that *we* was done two weeks ago. Slight ironic emphasis on the word ‘we’!

Preparation is a word that applies to St John the Baptist, whom we have just heard about in this morning’s gospel. John the Baptist was in the preparation business. In many ways he was the very last of the prophets before the coming of Jesus Christ. In a sense all the prophets of the Old Testament were preparing the way for the coming of the anointed one, the Messiah. But their message was diffuse, unclear. In John the Baptist, the first and only prophet in the New Testament, the message is becoming very focussed indeed. Let’s look for a few moments at what we know about this rather peculiar figure, John the Baptist.

### ***About John the Baptist***

First, the gospel of St John the Evangelist (not the gospel writer!) says this:

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for a testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not that light, but came to bear witness to that light.*

There’s that role of ‘preparation’. John the Baptist is a witness, preparing the way for the coming of Jesus. We know from the gospels that John the Baptist as a wild, ascetic figure – Mark says that he lived in the desert by the river Jordan, on a diet of locusts and wild honey. He was a preacher, and his message to the people who came out to see him was to repent and be baptised in the river Jordan for the forgiveness of sins. Also, he understood that he himself was fulfilling a role prophesied some five hundred years before by the prophet Isaiah. When people asked John the Baptist what he was doing, John’s gospel tells us that John the Baptist said

*I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the paths of the Lord’ as the prophet Isaiah said.*

But that was not all. John the Baptist knew that the coming Messiah was very imminent, and that his own role was very subordinate, in the end, very humble. He must have had plenty of admirers who wanted to put him on a pedestal. That may have been a temptation he was all too aware of. But he knew in his heart that to be exalted among men was not God’s calling for him. The Pharisees sent out a delegation from Jerusalem to check him out. Our reading told us that they had this question for him:

*...why are you baptising, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet? John answered them, ‘I baptise with water, but among you stands one who you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’*

### ***About us too***

There are some things about the story of John the Baptist that are about our stories too. In our lives at home or at work, are we not often called to prepare the way for others? When we raise children, for example, we have to put their needs first, if we are good parents. We prepare the way for them. At work, we often prepare the way for our superiors. When we do work in the community, we are seeking to give others a lift, not glorify ourselves.

And so also is our calling in Church. Our calling is like that of John the Baptist, to lift up Christ before all people, and to be utterly care-less about our own glory. Like John the Baptist, we may well know the temptation of wanting to be well-regarded by others, and to be put on a pedestal and receive praise and admiration. But our calling is to prepare the way for Jesus Christ in our own lives and in the life of his world; to show forth Christ, not to promote ourselves. There is spiritual danger in some of the tricks our egos play on us; tricks like a secret need for the recognition of others; if we are so tempted, let us hear again those words of John the Baptist: ... *among you stands one who you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.*'

### ***The Advent Wreath***

These truths are contained in a visual way in our Advent wreath. We lit the third candle today to recall John the Baptist, the third stage in God's preparation for the coming of the word-made-flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of the world. The first candle, remember, was for the patriarchs of old, our spiritual ancestors in the Jewish faith, Abraham and Sarah chief among them as the first to hear the call of God. The second was for the prophets, who at first dimly, but over time with increasing clarity, foresaw the coming Messiah. And the third, for John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, who called the people to repentance to prepare for the coming Messiah, and who knew the path of humility for the greater one to come, and who in the end gave his life in martyrdom at the hands of Herod.

Last week, a youngster asked me about the pink candle on the wreath. I said, 'what colour is half-way between purple and white?' 'Pink', she said. I said that it was about the light of Jesus coming closer and clearer on the last Sunday before Christmas. Perhaps we can say something more fully this morning. The pink candle, next Sunday, is for Mary, the Virgin mother of Jesus, through who the light of Christ was already beginning to shine as she responded to the message of the angel with those words of loving obedience to God: *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.* We are hearing words of humility, words that prepare the way for God to make his word flesh, in the Saviour born in Bethlehem.

Then, finally, at Christmas, we will light the white candle for our Lord himself, the light of the world. For his light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Wonderful words from the Christmas gospel, which we shall hear again at midnight on Christmas Eve, words that should make every Christian heart leap for joy. This is the light that really matters, Jesus himself, at the centre of all that has gone before, the preparation done by the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist, and the blessed Virgin Mary.

As we await Christmas, let us attend to the road of preparation for Jesus, the road in our hearts and lives. Amen.

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