

4th December 2016

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **182** **“On Jordan’s bank, the Baptist’ cry”**
 166 **“Christmas is coming”**
 189 **“Wild and lone the prophet’s voice”**
 591 **“Let all mortal flesh keep silent”**
 185 **“Sing we the King who is coming to reign”**

READINGS: Romans 15: 4-13
 Matthew 3:1-12

“PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD”

We have just lit two candles on our Advent wreath – today is the second Sunday in Advent, the season of waiting expectantly for God’s gift to us of his son at Christmas.

Last week John Lampard preached to us about waiting – waiting, that counter-cultural activity which we are called upon to do in this season. John also made us aware that this season of waiting is full of other activities and intentions – hope, judgement, expectation and preparation.

It is the theme of preparation that is taken up in our reading from Matthew’s Gospel today. John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, the desert of Judea, proclaiming a gospel of repentance and quoting from the prophet Isaiah, ‘prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’

Let us consider for a moment how we regard ‘preparation’ – the ordinary, everyday preparation which is part of our individual and communal lives. Yesterday evening I came into church to make sure that things were ready for today – that copies of our December/January edition of Window on Wesley’s were in place, the service orders ready, the reading printed out. But I was not alone in the Chapel – the choir were upstairs practising their items for today and Elvis was at the organ practising his pieces also. All of us were preparing – making things ready for today’s worship so that it should be a worthy offering to God and a meaningful experience for all the congregation.

Preparation is a good thing – but it is not always easy. For the choir, Elvis, the ministers and for you preparing for a Sunday is not so difficult because we have a pattern, we know the readings and the hymns and we know what is expected. We have all the information we need for our preparation but this is not always the case when we seek to prepare for the future.

For a start we do not know what the future holds – we do not even know what tomorrow may bring. 2016 has given us a lesson in this. All manner of things have happened that could not have foreseen, for which could not have prepared ourselves. We can name them easily – Brexit and the demise of David Cameron, the election of Donald Trump and just this week the voting out of President Jammeh of Gambia after 22 years of rule in what is hopefully a peaceful transition to a new President.

And on a lighter note who could have foreseen that Leicester City would have won the Premier League!

When we seek, as individuals or as communities, to prepare for the future we seek the advice of experts - political pundits and commentators, financial experts, of weather experts if we are wanting to know the weather for our travel or a big event or of doctors to help us stay healthy.

Well, in a strange way John the Baptist was an expert in his day. He was steeped in Jewish history and faith. He had grown up in the quietness of the desert living a life entirely devoted to God. John's soul had not been corrupted by the life of the cities and the practices of the professionally religious. People came in their thousands to listen to John because they believed that of all people he was closest to God and was speaking an authentic word from on high, which they thirsted to hear.

And what was John's word to the people? Repentance – a turning away from evil and a return to following the way of God. Repentance was the way of preparation proclaimed by John and the fact that he called people for baptism meant that it was for all – faithful Jews, Jews who had fallen away from their faith and for other God-fearers.

Not only was John providing a way of preparation for people he also warned them about how not to prepare – just doing as one had always done was no way to prepare for God's Messiah. Just relying on the habits of a lifetime would not do – change was needed, that was what repentance was all about.

Relying on one's religious background and family heritage of faith was no way to prepare either. John told off the professionally religious who came to him, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He told them fair and square that calling on the name of their ancestor, Abraham, would not do.

Above all John the Baptist called for people not just to think and speak righteously but to act righteously, too. His was an uncomfortable message calling for a complete and lasting change of heart as the only way of preparing for the coming of God's messenger. There was to be no place for pride, arrogance or confidence in one's ancestry as preparation for the coming one – nothing less than a complete turning around of one's life was needed. His word to the people was, 'if you want the promised Messiah, you have to prepare for him ... now.'

John's words struck a chord in peoples' hearts and they flocked to him for baptism. For over 400 years the voice of God, the voice of prophecy had been silent in the land. Now God was speaking through John and the people responded. Here was a wake-up call from one who was not seeking power or position for himself but of one preparing the way for the coming one.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" – that was the message of John to those Jews 2000 years ago.

John was a man of God, who had prayed and fasted in the desert and sought God's will but he was not the complete expert or the master futurologist of God's plan. He did not have the blueprint of God's kingdom in his back pocket. He did not know the contours of the coming promised Kingdom that the Messiah would inaugurate.

Indeed, if we read further about John the Baptist in the Gospels we realise that John himself was puzzled by a lot of the things that Jesus did. He was baffled and resistant when Jesus came to him for baptism – it should have been the other way round, John thought. Later on he sent his followers to Jesus to ask, 'are you the one who is coming or should we look for another?'

Yet as we prepare once again for the one who is to come – God's son – Immanuel, we are in a very different situation from that of John, his followers and contemporaries. John anticipated the ministry of Jesus whereas we live in the time after the completion of that ministry – after the crucifixion, after the resurrection and after the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. For us the Messiah has come and the glory of the Lord has been revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So our preparation for the coming of Jesus can be based not only on the words of John but on the ministry of his cousin, Jesus. Some of the aspects of Jesus's life and ministry which puzzled John and the people of his time, we understand, or at least, know, more fully.

We know that Jesus' message was not just for the Jews or god-fearing gentiles. We know that Jesus preached the message and lived the life that showed that in God's economy no one is to be written off as inferior or worthless. We know that the core of Jesus' message was and is the message of love. This is the message that flows out from the ministry of Jesus – embracing the unloved, including the outcasts, lifting up the fallen, inviting in those considered to be beyond the pale and finding a place for the most abject of sinners.

In John the Baptist we see the first breaking of the waves of a new era. These waves crash against all claims to superiority, all pretence, all formalised religion and ritual. They call for repentance – a change of life from words to actions in the service of the kingdom. But living, as we do in the wake of those waves, we sense something new is afoot, for which we remind ourselves to prepare year after year in this season of Advent – preparing ourselves by openness to the revolution of love.

We cannot know what awaits us in 2017 – whether Brexit will be hard or soft or somewhere in-between, whether Parliament will have a say in the triggering of Article 50 and the conditions of our exit from the EU or not. We cannot know if incoming President Trump will turn international relations upside down and seek to withdraw the USA from a global role or not. We do not know whether Europe and the EU itself will look very different following elections in a number of countries. We probably do know, however, that Leicester City will not win the Premier League this year!

However as we prepare for the coming days and months we do know that love and compassion for the other has to be at the heart of our preparation in a context where love and compassion may be in short supply.

And so, in this service we prepare our hearts and minds to receive God's gifts of bread and wine reminding us that the baby born at Christmas grew up and laid down his life for us.

We prepare now by reminding ourselves of our sins and our need for repentance and forgiveness, as we did earlier in the service when we said:

Holy and forgiving God
We have sinned against you and each other
In thought and word and deed.
We have turned from your life-giving word
And ignored the message of those you have sent.
We are **unprepared** for the coming of your Son.
Have mercy on us and forgive us.

Lord, we pray that your coming to us as a child at Christmas will not find us unprepared. Amen