

Advent 2 – A Time to Repent

Remembering the Prophets

‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him!’

That message was well known to the Jewish people when John the Baptist started preaching in Judea. They had heard it for hundreds of years, ever since it was proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah. It was part of the great message of hope, forgiveness, and healing after the horror of exile. The people’s hope was that God would come back, bringing comfort and rescue. And John was saying: it’s now! It’s happening now. Get ready, for God’s kingdom!

People sat up and listened. But the trouble was... people were not ready, not by a long way. It was as if their house was in order for the nitty gritty of everyday life... but not for the coming of a king! Even the devout people who worshipped regularly in the Temple knew in their bones that they were not ready for God to come back. But they knew from the prophets – Isaiah, Elijah, Micah – that God would come back when the people repented and turned to God with all their hearts. So when they were summoned by John to do just that, the people of Judea came in droves, to turn away from their old ways, and turn to God anew.

They were plunged in the water of the river Jordan as they confessed their sins. Over a thousand years after the children of Israel crossed the Jordan following the exile, God’s people went through the

river again. This time, not to enter and conquer the promised land, but for a greater conquest: God’s defeat of all evil and the establishment of his kingdom on earth as in heaven.

Isaiah speaks of this kingdom in words that resonated with the people at the time, and still resonate with us in their powerful imagery.

What God’s people hoped for was:
A shoot from the ancestral family tree of God’s children,
producing a branch that would bear fruit,
And on that special shoot, the Spirit of God would rest,
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge of the Lord.

With righteousness he would judge the needy, with justice he would give decisions for the poor of the earth. And then the wolf would live with the lamb, the lion would eat straw like the ox - powerful symbols that point to the end of harm and destruction, to a time when the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord. A time when God’s vision for the world is fulfilled.

That’s what the people of God hoped for, and they had the power to make way for this new order of things. But did they? Well, John didn’t think so. And looking at the state of the world today, what would he think now?!

In good prophet’s fashion, John’s message was far from comfortable. It wasn’t comfortable then and it’s not comfortable now. When he saw some of

the Jewish leaders, Pharisees and Sadducees, coming for baptism, he scoffed at them. 'You brood of vipers!' He called them. The Pharisees prided themselves on their purity and their righteousness. But their pride itself was getting in the way of God's homecoming, so was their arrogance towards other Israelites and indeed the rest of the world. So John attacked them even on their ancestry.

'Just because you have Abraham as your father, do not think that your family tree is a fruitful tree. The axe is ready and waiting to chop down the tree.'

The only way to be worthy of the coming king is to be a fruitful tree.

It's always satisfying to see the Pharisees getting a good telling off from a prophet. But let's not deceive ourselves. We could very well be the modern-day Pharisees in some of our attitudes. And we have our modern-day prophets too, men and women of great faith who dedicate their lives to the service of others and point to God, ceaselessly proclaiming his love for the whole of humanity. By their example, they make us wonder: 'As the human race are we a fruitful tree? Or are we good enough for the bonfire?'

And what about us as followers of Jesus? The stark warnings of the prophets set the tone for much of the story of Jesus. Jesus's own mission was quite different from what people sometimes imagine; the comfort and healing of his kingdom-message was balanced by the stern and solemn warning that when God comes back, he demands absolute allegiance.

The God who came to his people in Jesus will one day unveil his kingdom in all its glory, bringing justice and joy to the whole world. How can we get ready for that day? Where do the roads need straightening out? What fires need to be lit, to burn away the rubbish in his path?

This time of year is great for a good clean up of our lives. It is time to get rid of the old cobwebs, things and ideas that are obstructing the path of the Lord into our hearts and minds. And the beauty of this is that God is always waiting for us to open up to his presence and make straight the path for his coming. Every time we pray to God and recognize that we have turned away from him, every time we ask for forgiveness, God listens and gives us a new chance. Tirelessly, God waits, and we know from Jesus himself that God, as the perfect shepherd, will take the time to find the ones who have wandered off and bring them back to himself. Amazing grace.

But this time of year is also an invitation to think in terms of legacy: the legacy of the prophets, the legacy of writers, composers, musicians, artists, particularly those who work selflessly to proclaim God's gospel of peace through their work.

What is *our* legacy? Is it fruitful? I do think that God and his prophets invite us to think about what we leave behind. Things like courage, integrity, creativity, humour, hard work too; and helping others, cooking for others, inviting others into our homes for drinks or simple comfort from the cold.

All these things are selfless, and I do believe they are kingdom building, because they make us fruitful and inspiring.

And this week, our little Advent booklet is filled with ideas to be fruitful and closer to God: being generous and humble, slowing down and taking care of our environment, even feeding the birds, praying for transformation, offering a present or a Christmas decoration to someone new, singing of God's goodness in the songs, the hymns and the carols... all these things and more are chances to change our hearts and prepare for the coming of the Lord!

So let us thank the prophets who had the courage to speak God's words of hope and who inspired God's people to become a fruitful tree. And let us pray.

Almighty God,
help us to make room in our lives
so that your love and your peace can
grow within us.
Walk with us this Advent,
by your grace, make straight the paths of
our lives,
make us ready to listen to your voice of
wisdom and generosity,
and prepare our hearts for the coming of
your Son,
Our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.