

Commentaries – I have many – my bookshelves are weighed down with them but they are very useful. Whilst browsing through them – researching for my Sermon I was continually interrupted - not by a person – but a song that went around and round in my head – what a great hymn I thought – searching through both of the Hymnbooks used in Saint Andrew’s and failing to find it anywhere. Of course, it was ‘Oh! prepare ye the way of the Lord’ from the musical written by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber. Stirring and very difficult to ignore.

Advent is, of course, a time of preparation. Nothing focuses our minds and hearts more than the readings we heard read, so beautifully earlier. Preparations began last week; most folk will have opened the first window of their Advent Calendars. Probably finding a chocolate, which will certainly be a distraction from the real purpose of Advent. In the Book of Malachi, we hear God saying to those who have ears to hear ‘I am sending a messenger of my Covenant – who you will be delighted to meet’.

There is a great BUT – will YOU be ready? A prophet foretells the coming of a Messiah to the people of the Lord. But who will be able to stand before Him? The phrase “Those with clean hands and clean hearts” comes to mind.

Another prophet – John – the cousin of Jesus, continues this tradition – calling all to prepare a way for the coming King. He quotes from the Book of Isaiah – “Prepare the way of the Lord – make his paths straight – every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low: the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see it together.’ And immediately I think of Handel’s “Messiah”. Think how often you have been able to remember the words of the Bible by humming a familiar hymn or Anthem when you could not hold a Bible. Many things combine to help us to remember what we were taught by our Sunday School teachers, parents and preachers about the coming in of the Kingdom of God. And many things help us to remember what we were taught. We remember music and the words of songs and hymns when much else has been forgotten – this has been scientifically proven. But even more, the actions prompted by that teaching! Children learn more about sincerity, honesty, and unconditional love by what they see others do in their daily lives. Following in the footsteps of Christ. Learning from his example, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The command is to prepare the way of the Lord –
Where exactly?

In the midst of a world oppressed by war and terrorism.

In the midst of the people who have power over others.

In the midst of those who compromise for their own status and esteem. Or any who speak for an institution of exclusion. Or any Government which is corrupt.

This seems to be a tall order but, if we are to obey God’s word, we must be brave enough to speak out; to stand up for the marginalised, terrorised; the violated – the excluded- and for those who live in poverty.

We may be afraid of many things – the opinion of others – of failing – of being lonely – of not having enough – of being hurt – and of being overwhelmed. Yet – though people may laugh at us, though we may not succeed - though we may stand alone - though we may suffer losses and may break down – if God is with us, we need not be afraid.

As James Montgomery said in his hymn "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire uttered or unexpressed" and it is through prayer, unspoken with all sincerity, that we will find God's help. So that firstly we clear the clutter from our lives to make space for God. We sweep away the rubbish, cut loose to clinging sin, prepare the way – we build a highway for him. When we open a little window today – what do we see? Another chocolate? A whole new world? Glory?

In Paul's letter to the Philippians he uses a familiar form of greeting – firstly he gives thanks to God for the people he is addressing and this custom is followed by him in every letter except Galatians, where his passionate concern carries him into an immediate reprimand. In this letter, above all, he is moved by deepest affection for his readers; it is evident from the first sentence that the apostle feels a closer sympathy between himself and the Philippians than any other of his churches. He is so encouraging. It is a very moving, loving and passionate letter. He says "It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

On the second week in Advent – heeding Paul's advice and gaining courage from all who have gone before – the witnesses down the ages – in the power of the Holy Spirit- let us hold fast to the truth that God is with us. As we enter the season of longing and waiting let us hope that he will bear with us a little longer – for he has been with us from the beginning of our journey, even when we ignored him or forgot that he was there. We are blinded by the brashness and the commercialisation of this season. We need to open our eyes to glimpses of his glory. We need to open our minds to hints of the coming incarnation. When we are deafened by our own shouting, we need to open our ears to the whispers of his grace. We need to share with him in longing for restoration and renewal: to be watchful for the light that breaks through in the darkness of our world. God says "Be patient – watch and wait for the time is close at hand - know that you are loved, forgiven and healed."

Open the next window on your Advent calendar. Do you see a chocolate? Do you see signs of an opportunity to serve your Lord? Do you see a whole new world of love and reconciliation? Where love is king and no one goes to bed hungry – where no one is homeless – or uneducated – and war has ceased – where there is peace for all humanity – the bereaved and lonely are gathered closely –where all children are cherished – where there is no class distinction – no abusive relationships – no slavery and all are free? Do you see a glimpse of the Glory of God? Preparation – is the name of the game – in prayerful anticipation – for the Joy of the world to be complete. Amen