

Prepare The Way

Luke 3:1-6

It was Sunday 20th March, and it wasn't a normal Sunday in Lent. For one, St Paul's Glenelg had changed its service time just for that Sunday, and for good reason. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip were visiting Adelaide that day, as part of the Queen's Silver Jubilee tour of Australia. The route they were taking from the royal yacht Britannia into the city of Adelaide they passed within 500 metres of our church. And so, with an earlier finish to church, we would have the opportunity of greeting the royal procession.



After church we found a suitable spot, together with many other onlookers. Over the previous months, the highway had received some much needed maintenance. Bumpy sections about which motorists had long complained were resurfaced. The grass on the median strip was watered regularly, so that her majesty wouldn't see the typical parched vista of an Adelaide summer. Shrubs were planted and young trees were staked. Local residents were asked to get their gardens into tip-top shape, and more than a few union Jacks were flying to indicate support for our Queen.



After what seemed like an eternity of waiting, the police motor cycle escort came into view, and then the regal, jet-black Bentley Cabriolet, travelling at perhaps 40km/h. The Queen and Prince Philip were sitting in the back, with the royal wave much in evidence. I was excited. One of the most famous people in the world was passing by, only metres away. And then she was gone, and we went home.

After the visit, life along Anzac Highway returned to normal. The grass on the median strip soon died. The bitumen cracked again. Potholes were just left to grow bigger. Gardens became overgrown. Why was it that we got so excited?

We may want to ask ourselves the very same question as another Advent comes around.

What is it that we are getting excited about? How does the arrival of Jesus on the scene, in the



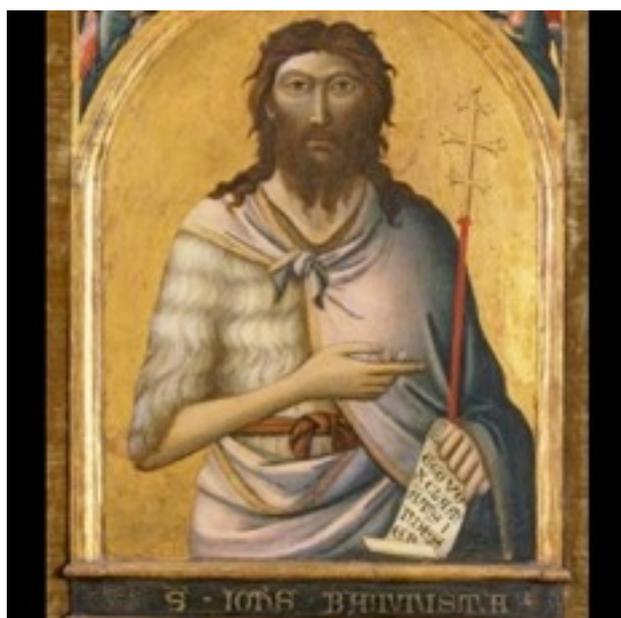
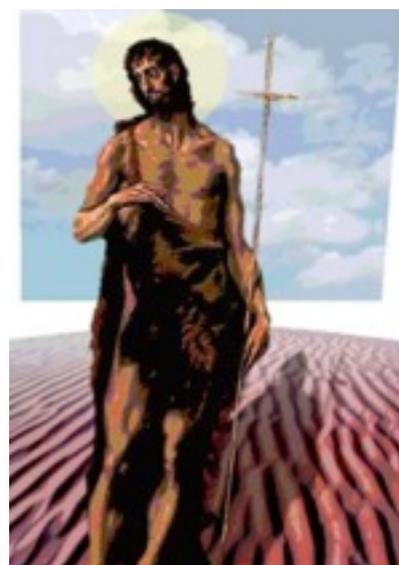
form of our Christmas preparations and celebrations, speak into our everyday lives? And similarly, how does the fact that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, shape the way we live right now. The bottom line is not that we are welcoming something important, in the form of this Christmas time, but someone.

John the Baptist was given the task of welcoming this someone, Jesus Christ. At his birth, his father Zechariah sang of his son's life mission: "You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins..."

John's mission is set against the backdrop of a world not expecting too much action from God. The world of politics, war, religion, work and survival kept on rolling. Roman rule is the political reality, and the high priest wields considerable power in acting as the voice of God since the voice of the prophets had been stilled.

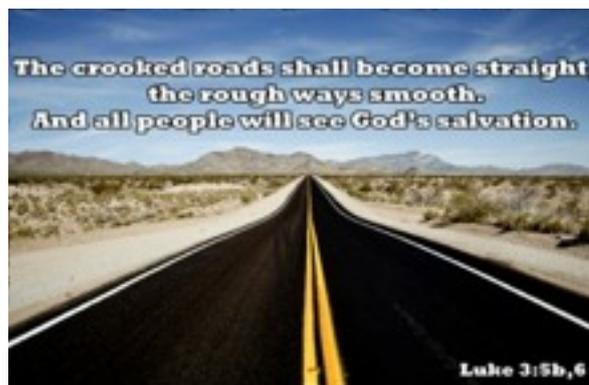
God now speaks into this world through a man who lives on the fringes of the society, far from the movers and shakers he is called to preach to. Mark tells us that John was a wildman, living in the wilderness, a place far removed from the noise and action of the everyday world. The Bible pictures the wilderness as a place of listening to God, where God tests the obedience of his people. John is listening. What does God say through him?

"John went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism for the repentance of sins." Fresh from his own exodus journey, far away from the madding crowds, John now re-engages with the real world and bring God's saving message. God is doing something amazingly, astoundingly new. He's getting ready to unleash his righteousness on an unsuspecting world. Get yourselves ready to hear. Get rid of everything in your lives that closes your mind of God. Be baptized as a sign of this change, of the washing away of all the things that have claim on your lives and wait for God to act.



Repentance is the heart of John's message. Repentance can be literally translated as "to turn one's mind around." It could also be translated "afterthought" or "second thought." It means thinking through the way we put our lives together, the things that we consider foundational, the motivations which cause us to act in a certain way. Religious people in John's day were caught up in the performance trap. God's law was broken down into 613 separate commandments. You needed an incredible focus on the self to ensure that you kept each and every one of them. Sadly, this blinded people to the needs and concerns of others. The life of faith was overly complex and terribly draining. It didn't give life and hope, only despair or smugness, depending on your level of obedience or self-awareness.

Luke gives a commentary of what repentance means by using Isaiah's words from chapter 40. "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation."



Imagine with me that our lives resemble the topography of Israel. There are mountains of pride, which block us from seeing the ways in which we have served ourselves, and not our neighbour, and certainly not God. These mountain ranges don't let us realise that we are responsible to God for every thought, word and deed. We also construct the magnificent edifices of our achievements. We are blinded by the sun of our selfishness, which shines off these glass towers we make. Like the people of Babel, we believe that there is nothing impossible for us to do.

What about the valleys? Could the valleys represent the polar opposite in our lives, the despair that smothers us as we realise how deeply we have failed God, the pain and hurt of relationships we have played our parts in destroying, the fear of fronting the holy God, who calls us to give an accounting of our lives., the regret of falling into the same sins again and again?

Come out with John into the wilderness. Think of the wilderness as the time we spent in confession and absolution. A place where, for a moment, we shut out the white noise of a pre-Christmas world, and spoke honestly to God. "Gracious God, we acknowledge that we are sinners and we confess our sins--those known to us that burden our hearts,

and those unknown to us but seen by you. We know that before you nothing remains hidden, and in you everything is revealed." In the silence we emptied ourselves before God. We admitted that we needed him more than anyone or anything else. We longed to hear the word that promises new life. We had faith that God wanted, and could change our lives, and lead us to live in a new way: "Upon your confession, I, as called and ordained servant of the word, announce the grace of God to all of you, in the name of the one who John was pointing to, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."



Repentance doesn't mean beating ourselves up until we are enough of a mess for God to feel sorry for us. I like this definition: "To repent is to change our perception, to recognize that the reign of God is at hand, that life in the world to come has already begun. To repent is not [solely] to lament our sins or be sorry for the evil we've done; it is to have faith, to perceive life and our lives in a new way." That's why John urges those who come to him to bear the fruit of repentance. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has

food must do likewise..." Simply put, repentance says, "I can't." Forgiveness says, "God can." We now say, "I will."

Repentance is the road less travelled. We have no time for spiritual introspection and telling the truth to ourselves when get so busy. But by confronting our sinfulness, centring ourselves in Christ, and receiving his word of forgiveness, we are set free on a remarkable journey, one in which

our individual, single life makes a world of difference in our world, where our repentant, reflective, replenished lives bring life to others. Luke records God's promise attached to John's proclamation, "And all flesh shall see the salvation of our God."

Where can you find this wilderness space this Advent? Where can you hear clearly the call to repentance and renewed living? Right here in worship is a good place to start. What about when you go for walk, in the early morning, or in the evening? Or sitting at a park bench, or in your garden, ruminating on God's word, listening for the word he has for you. And then think of how you can bring life to those who feel that they live in a spiritual wasteland, because you are full of God's life. This is the way to go in Advent. Amen.

