

Sunday 10th December 2017
2nd Sunday of Advent (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 40.1-11

NT: 2 Peter 3.8-15a

G: Mark 1.1-8

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

If last week, Father Crispin was urging you to keep awake, I am saying that this week that is not enough.

You must also be prepared.

I'm a fan of Peter Kay, not least because I'm from just up the road from Bolton and his observational humour is so reminiscent of my early family life.

Like the story of when his grandparents got a video recorder and he called round to find them in the kitchen whispering to each other over a cup of tea.

It turned out that they were recording a programme in the living room and didn't want to make a noise in case that too was recorded and spoiled the show.

When my parents first got a video recorder, they kept it under an old curtain in case anyone passing saw the light and decided to break in and steal it.

My mother still keeps bottles of wine hidden in the same way and for the same reason – and this is in the back room!

One of Peter Kay's more memorable images is the sight on Christmas morning of people out in the street carrying chairs.

They are on the way for their dinner, bringing the emergency chairs with them.

There's the description then of everyone crowded round the table, all at different heights, perched on everything from the children's chairs to high bar stools.

I'll be needing at least 1 emergency chair this Christmas as the family continues to grow.

There is a Jewish custom at the Seder meal at Passover to keep an empty chair and a glass of wine for Elijah should he return.

Tradition had it that Elijah would come back to prepare the way for the Messiah.

His return would be a sign to make the preparations necessary to welcome the Saviour into the midst of his people.

The prophet was to ensure that the Jewish people were physically and spiritually ready for the coming of the Messiah.

As Christians, we believe that this was John the Baptist's role.

His was the voice crying in the wilderness as Isaiah had foretold.

He was to gather the lost sheep of Israel, ready for the return of the Shepherd who would lead his flock to redemption and the kingdom of God.

John was not an immediately charismatic figure, he did not come with charm and gentle encouragement.

His message was tough and to the point.

He was particularly challenging to those who thought themselves to be already holy and in no need of repentance.

As Matthew's gospel tells us

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

10 Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

His message echoed that of Isaiah that we should make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

In other words, the preparation for the Messiah, our preparation for the coming of Jesus is not about a bit of light dusting, a quick tidy round, the appearance of being ready.

We are required to change drastically, root and branch, to level the high places, raise the valleys and make the rough places smooth.

John challenges us today, just as he did centuries ago.

His message remains as stark and provocative as it was then.

We are called to be transformed through the power and grace of God, to bear good fruit, to be true witnesses to the Word made flesh.

Advent is our opportunity to examine ourselves in the light of Christ, to take stock, to try again.

We live in a world where many continue to suffer in darkness, where the power of evil continues to bring desperation, where selfishness and greed ignores the needs of others who struggle with very little.

We are called not to just be ready ourselves for the coming of God's kingdom but to shout out John the Baptist's message exhorting all people to make straight the paths.

We are called to be that voice crying in the wilderness to demand justice for all people, to challenge all those in positions of power and authority to work for peace in our world, to take responsibility for making positive changes in the places that we can influence.

To rise to this challenge, we need to make the necessary preparations.

We need to pray, to discern the will of the Father, to listen to the Word of God made visible in Jesus, to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

And we need to be transformed, ready for action, ready to do our part when the Messiah comes on a day we do not know and at an hour we do not expect.

So stay awake.

Have your emergency chair ready.

Be prepared. Amen.

The Revd. Michelle Montrose