

**Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2018**  
**Advent 2 (C)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Baruch 5**  
**NT: Philippians 1.3-11**  
**G: Luke 3.1-6**

### **Be Prepared**

The signs that Christmas is almost upon us are all around, whether it is the decorations, the trees here in church, the TV advertising with each new trailer eagerly anticipated like some blockbuster, or the shops full of Christmas food, clothes and presents with crowds pacified by soundtracks: Slade, Wizard and Wham, or the subliminal signs that we are getting even closer to Christmas, like the Easter Eggs for sale in the local Co-op or the advertising for the Boxing Day and New Year sales in the shops. Through TV and the media, advertising and salesmanship, booking ahead and forward planning, we are always called to think about the next big thing ... the event that's still to come that supersedes what's happening now.

But for us in the Christian Church, Advent means that time to take time out, an opportunity for us to spurn the things of the world, the driven-ness of our modern day and to stop to ponder the deeper things of life and of faith in the present moment. As we enter into the season of Advent; we take time to prepare, to think, to pray, to be properly ready for the amazing, cataclysmic event of the Incarnation, we know that Christmas is near, because we are following the Advent journey. And, here we are at Week 2 of Advent. Preparation is the keyword at the moment and for most of us our Christmas preparations will now be well and truly underway.

Advent is a time for us to reflect on how we might prepare for not only the celebrations of the historic coming of Christ but also for the second coming of Christ foretold to us.

We may find that concept difficult but in fact the scriptures themselves give us all we need to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Within them we find details of the prophecies of Jesus, stories full of moral guidance on how to live our lives. We have the words of Jesus himself in the gospels with his parables and teachings to inspire us and we have characters in the bible whose sole purpose is to lead us to Jesus, to help us prepare. One of the most famous of these is John the Baptist who features heavily in our advent devotions.

Now is not the time to go too deeply into the role of John the Baptist as we'll be coming onto him more fully later in Advent. But it is worth pointing out that although we may be striving to live our lives by the Bible, John took on the established religious authorities in the form of the Pharisees and Sadducees because he could see that they lived their lives by the book. They kept to the letter of the Hebrew Bible, but inwardly their motivations left a lot to be desired. It was all about how they were seen in society, status and power and not about living in humble obedience to God.

The first two verses of Luke's story today are full of historical detail and help us to pinpoint the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry. He places this story in the echoes of the Old Testament prophets as if John is from their same mould. In some senses he is just that, a man out of the desert dressed in rough clothing and living off the land eating locusts and other creatures and speaking with conviction about the momentous change that he is herald to.

Luke itemises the various Roman rulers and Jewish leaders of the time and implies the hostility amongst them all. Herod the Great was a tyrant and impoverished his people by overtaxing them and they were considering insurrection hoping God would free them from the yoke of oppression and John the Baptist's promised Christ could be their saviour. But John was seen by Herod as a political agitator who described him and his retinue, as we will hear next week, as a 'brood of vipers' and he subsequently had him beheaded. So life for just about everyone in the region was unstable to say the least. And it is in this setting that Luke says 'the word of God came to John, son of Zecharia' proclaiming in the wilderness a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Preparing the way as Paul says in his letter to the Philippians "that you may be pure and blameless when the day of Christ arrives" Philippians called The Epistle of Excellent Things by William Barclay. The words "joy" and "rejoice" occur and for most of us our Christmas preparations will now be well and truly underway often – a pointer to the joy enshrined in the Incarnation.

We start getting ready for Christmas during Advent. We continue to come to church; we often frown upon the increased commercialisation of Christmas in the rest of society and the loss of the true meaning of Christmas. And it's easy to fool ourselves into thinking that compared with everyone else we are getting ready in the proper way, we are putting Christ first without any real and specific repentance.

Advent is the time for us to 'get ready' for the momentous arrival of our Incarnate God because all flesh – all of humanity – shall see the salvation of God, Luke tells us, quoting Isaiah 40 and pointing to John, the messenger. The same words of Isaiah echoed in our OT reading from Baruch

"For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low

and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.”

When you are ready, John’s saying, you’ll know what salvation means. When you realise what it’s all about, you will know that Christ is closer than ever before ... How do we know Christmas is coming? Because Advent calls us to get ready for this amazing truth ...

What steps might we take to be properly ready? We have to remind ourselves that Christ’s coming is about the things of the heart and not just about ‘doing stuff’.

There is so much ‘doing’ in the run-up to Christmas. Just look at the list of Carol services here at St Nick’s.

But God came in Jesus 2000 years ago not to set in motion a list of things to do, no, God came to show how supreme love could change our lives. John the Baptist’s task was not to prepare roads and paths, to smooth rough tracks and make travelling easier. His task was of the heart and not of the feet. His purpose was of the soul and not of the body. His message was to attitude and faith and not to busyness and doing stuff! God came in human form to a stable in Bethlehem not to start a set of traditions that we always have to keep up ... God came, not to set us a catalogue of impossible achievements ... God came to offer us fullness of life ... The Incarnation is about the things of the heart and not the things of our doing.

The Incarnation is about the things of faith and not the things of our achieving. The Incarnation is about who we are and what we are and how we are, not what we do.

This thinking about the meaning of it all doesn’t just happen. We have to give it space and time.

That's what Advent means. And if we don't use it well, we'll just be swept along and miss the meaning altogether. We have to take time to prepare. We have to take time to look for the wonder, the light and the life that is to come. We have to be ready to see, to know, to experience how amazing this Christmas, this Incarnation stuff really is ... the Advent gift ... the God-given gift of life in all its redemptive fullness. Or else? We miss it! Consumed by the busyness and business of Christmas ; we can be trapped in our own space and our crowded journeys; carried along without looking around us. The truth about this Advent Season is that it points us to a Christmas which is mind-boggling, remarkable, world-changing, cataclysmic, explosive, unbelievable ... Don't make it too familiar, too ordinary, too small. Be amazed. Be blown away. Be changed. Be transformed. Share the Good News. For then we WILL know how wonderful this season actually is.

So let's take time to think in this Advent Season ... Let's take time to be amazed at the wonder of it all. When we do all of that, we will know how wonderful Christmas actually is.

Fr Bill Addy