

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 6th December 2020

My senses come alive in these weeks during December, even in the midst of the dreadful trauma of the pandemic of Covid 19.

The flickering of burning candles; the lights of the Christmas tree shimmering in the darkness; the comfort of sitting by the fireside while sipping mulled wine or a pot of my favourite Yunnan tea and savouring a Florentine! Ahhhh... and the sound of the Christmas Carols on Classic FM.

One of my most delightful memories of childhood was the evening that Dad and Mum would take us in the car to see the Christmas lights in Paisley, then on to Glasgow. Somehow it always was frosty and cold in those December nights so long ago, and we were packed into the back seat of the car, all wrapped up in our duffel coats and woollen gloves, and off we would set, stopping down by Paisley Abbey to gaze in wonder at the wonderful lights in all their myriad colours around the George Aitken Clark Town Hall and the River Cart. Then it was on to George Square to see the magnificent tree and all the eye catching breath taking lights on the City Chambers, and in those days, Dad could drive the length of Sauchiehall Street and we would see the lights portraying Santa and his reindeer outside Pettigrew and Stephen, then a snowman or two and tin soldiers strung out from Copeland and Lye, and then back to George Square to get out of the car to go and look at the Nativity Scene – Mary and Joseph hovering over the Baby Jesus and a menagerie of animals giving fullness to this sacred reminder amidst all the glitter.

But, now that I am older, I realise that there was always one person missing in that Nativity Tableau. That hairy, unkempt, wild looking guy wearing camel hair, who features in so much of the Advent story – John the Baptist!

He seems far too much out of place in the story!

He appears every Advent like a bull in a china shop.

Amid the jingling of the bells and the carol singing, we hear a cry that sounds like someone's fingernails on a blackboard.

"Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!"

His ragged message of repentance seems so out of place at this time!

What has John the Baptist got to do with this special time of the year when we try to be with our families and friends and enjoy time together?

Advent reminds us that if we are going to welcome the good news from the sweet voices of angels from on high, we will need first to listen to the raspy voice of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness to prepare a way for Christ's coming.

"Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!" he cried, quoting the words of the Prophet Isaiah who first spoke them centuries before when the nation of Israel had been carted off as slaves to Babylon.

The imagery which Isaiah uses is from the practice of clearing the pathway of a mighty emperor or a king in preparation for the ruler's procession to the city, in order to be inaugurated as the sovereign of the people.

Bumps were levelled; potholes were filled; rocks were removed; weeds were pulled up. Crooked portions of the road were straightened to make it easier for the ruler's procession. Sometimes I wish South Ayrshire Council would put those words into practice!

Isaiah used that very imagery to give the captive Israelites in Babylon, hope – "Prepare the way for God, who comes to liberate you and lead you across the wilderness, back to your homeland, where He will reign supreme!"

John uses that same imagery to tell the people to prepare the pathway for the One who comes bringing salvation to the people.

"Prepare the way! Remove the injustices that block God's pathway! Lift up those valleys sunken by despair and despondency. Knock down the haughty hills of pride and prejudice! Prepare the way for God, who comes bringing justice and liberation through the Messiah!"

"O come on!" folk cry! "We don't want to hear this miserable kind of message! 'Tis the season to be jolly!"

I saw a wonderful cartoon depicting a minister waiting in his vestry before the service began. He is standing in his robes and he has a sneer on his face. Through the vestry door, you can see the congregation taking their pews, waiting for worship to begin. In his hand, the preacher has his sermon notes with the heading, "Sermon on Hell". And as he stands there, watching his people gather, he is turning up the thermostat on the heating to 40 degrees!

It's clear that as he is preaching, he wants to turn up the heat to make a point about hell to get his people to change their ways, to turn their lives around and be the people God intended them to be!

In Advent, we hear John the Baptist turning up the heat, and calling out to those who would listen to look at their lives and change what needed to be changed.

A few years ago, I was amused to read a review of a Christmas song that Cliff Richard had released. It was called "Saviour's Day", and some of you may remember it. Well, the reviewer said, "The song is ok, but there is no holly, no mistletoe, no wine, no presents around a tree, no Santa."

"In fact," wrote the reviewer, "this song has nothing to do with Christmas at all!"

If that doesn't make you laugh, it will make you cry!

What have we done to the birthday of the Saviour of the world?

John the Baptist would probably have a few choice words to say about that.

In essence, he would tell us to repent. To turn around; to have a change of heart.

He would tell us to open ourselves up to the real meaning of Christmas. Repent! Prepare the way of the Lord!

There you have it - John's abrasive message for Advent.

The Kingdom of God is at hand!

The dominion of heaven is near!

The age of God's reign is just around the corner!

The season is at hand when peace and hope will bud and bloom.

The day when war and violence shall forever cease is upon us.

The hour when we will be judged, not by the colour of our skin or our sexual preference or our postcode but by the content of our character, is on our doorstep.

So, as our homes are decorated with our candles and our wreaths and our trees, the time is close at hand.

As we make our shopping list and check it twice, the kingdom of God is coming.

So, prepare a way for the Lord, make His paths straight!

And get started now – grab a shovel; fill in a pothole; level the road; pick up a rock, pull up a weed .

Make up a hamper for a family who have little.

Volunteer to feed the hungry.

Work on a project to protect the dispossessed.

Let go of some of your privileges and responsibilities.

Welcome a stranger.

Visit someone in prison.

Give generously to a few deserving causes and charities who are having a very sore time just now.

For God is coming down the highway of this wilderness world.

There is a new world coming and you and I are called to help prepare it.

Friends, He is coming!

Are you paying attention to that voice crying in the wilderness?

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister