

Reading Luke 3:1-6

The great challenge of this reading is in Isaiah's words:

"Prepare the way for the Lord"

Some of us may hear it and feel what a rallying cry! What a trumpet call to action at the start of Advent!

But others perhaps on reflection may feel what an anti-climax — as we pause to realise how inadequately most of us respond to this summons to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ.

All too often, even for believers, Advent is the season of ambivalence. For we can feel ourselves caught in an invisible tension between the spiritual and the commercial.

The secular world calls this period "the run up to Christmas".

- December sales on the high street,
- Advent chocolate bars as 2 for 1 special offers in the supermarket,
- Office parties and long liquid lunches,
- In the political world MPs used to describe this time of year as "excess followed by recess".

Inevitably the spiritual world tends to get edged out by the hurly burly of such distractions.

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Of course half Christians, that large and mainly Anglican amorphous group which is about as useful as a group of people who are as half pregnant, dimly recognise that this is the season of peace, goodwill, carol services, pop-out advent calendars and school nativity plays.

But those who are more committed and read their Bibles know that 2,000 years ago this was a time of yearning for the coming, *the adventus*, of God who had been prophesied to enter the world as Israel's long awaited Messiah.

Alas, then, as now, God can too often seem far away and inaccessible.

Yet stretching across the millennia from the poor hill villages of 1st century Judea to the posh and prosperous urban villages of Fulham, Chelsea and Kensington there is a link. The link is that throughout history there are often rustlings and murmurs in human hearts of a spiritual hunger and a longing for God to reveal himself.

If only He would come to us.

In the words of Woody Allen "If only he could give us some clear sign like making a large deposit in my name in a Swiss Bank!"

We know that Swiss banks did not exist when our reading begins — in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. However, everyone and everything else mentioned in the first two verses of Luke Chapter 3 actually did exist.

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Among sceptics there is a tendency to dismiss the Gospel's birth narratives and their colourful cast of shepherds, Wise men, oxen standing around the manger, and choirs of angels merely as a series of allegorical fables.

But Luke, the author of this Gospel and the Book of Acts, has proved to be a reliable historian when it comes to facts about events, governments, censuses, buildings, priesthoods and rulers.

This is important. Those of you who have done the Alpha Course may remember that the first session is called "The Historical Jesus".

It establishes by quoting from renowned historians like Josephus and Tacitus that Jesus was indeed a significant historical figure in his time.

These opening verses of Luke Chapter 2 could well be called "The Historical John".

It would be tedious to give a detailed analysis of the six names listed here from Tiberius to Pontius Pilate to Annas and Caiaphas. Yet they are important because this is the only attempt in the New Testament to place the events of the Gospel in the context of history. And it was a dark oppressive history of tyrannical rulers and corrupt spiritual leaders.

Luke also helps us to date, approximately, some of these people and events. For example Annas began his high priesthood in AD6 a fact which enables us to point to John's time in history. And there's plenty of other evidence about his life.

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Some years ago my wife and I visited the tomb of John the Baptist in Damascus which was then freely prayed over every day by both the Christians and Muslims of Syria.

We saw the inscription, and the tomb itself which seemed to be further confirmation of what a significant and historical figure John was.

As an amateur historian myself, I wonder if Luke started Chapter 3 with this rather dreary recital of names and rulers because they provided such a solid factual background as a contrast to the extraordinary supernatural signs and portents were to emerge as symbols of hope in the first Advent.

Anyway let's move from the historical to the spiritual and ask four key questions about John the Baptist.

- 1) Who was John?
- 2) What had been prophesised about John?
- 3) What was John's message?
- 4) What is the relevance of John's message to us in Advent today?

Who was John?

John we are told in verse 2 was simply a son of Zachariah.

Now we do know something about Zachariah his father from Luke Chapter 1. He was an elderly priest at the Temple. He was married to Elizabeth. They were both described as "upright in the sight of God". A devout but childless elderly couple.

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Zachariah was carrying out his priestly duties in the Temple when suddenly he had a supernatural vision. An angel arrived and told him that his wife was going to bear him a son.

Reasonably enough the frightened Zachariah expressed a few doubts. "How can I be sure about this?" he asked the angel. "I am an old man and my wife is well along in years".

But the angel rebuked Zachariah for his lack of faith and assured him that his son who should be called John. "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God."

Now this specific reference to John being filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth in Luke 1:15, is particularly interesting to spirit led churches like HTB.

In most of the books of the Old Testament the Holy Spirit had been conspicuous by his absence. He was at best a rare and very occasional source of inspiration. He only revealed himself to kings, prophets, rulers, the chief builder of the Temple Bezalel and other great men.

But suddenly in this first Advent the Holy Spirit seemed to be appearing all over the hill country of Judea entering the hearts of ordinary humble people.

In addition to coming to John from Birth, we are told in Luke Chapter 2, the Holy Spirit also came to Mary, to Simeon, an old man in the Temple, to Anna, a prophetess and others.

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So the first Advent was not only about the coming of the Lord. It was also about the coming of the Holy Spirit into a much wider range of ordinary human hearts.

Now John's was the first of these new Testaments hearts to be inspired by the Holy Spirit who made him a prophet and a preacher. As our reading puts it in verse 2:

"the word of God came to John, son of Zachariah, in the desert".

Now that phrase "**the word of God came to**" is also to be found in the first or second verse of the opening chapters of the Books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and Joel.

It was the sign for all those prophets, just as it was for John, that the coming of the word of God gave them his authority to preach and to lead the people of Israel.

Yet unique among all prophets, John's ministry had itself been a subject of prophesy.

This brings us to the question:

What was prophesied about John?

Immediately we turn to the magnificent passage of Isaiah quoted in verses 4-6 which begins:

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"The voice of one calling in the desert
Prepare the way for the Lord".

But whose was this mysterious voice and what did his command mean?

Today we understand more about the answers to these questions.

Last Sunday I went with my daughters to the Cadogan Hall to hear a marvellous performance of Handel's *Messiah*. I try to do this every Advent.

That's because almost exactly 64 years ago the most thrilling moment of my childhood came when I stood, literally tingling with anticipation as a 9 year old choirboy in a 300 strong chorus of East Anglian voices at Norwich Cathedral- about to sing in my first *Messiah* conducted in 1952 by Sir Malcolm Sargent.

Then as last Sunday the moment when Handel's music for me starts the tingling down the back of my neck and for many others is not so much in the great set pieces like the Halleluiah chorus but in the mysterious words and the haunting melody of the opening Tenor Aria "Every valley shall be exalted".

These words incidentally are an infinitely better version than the prosaic words in Verse 5 of our NIV reading "Every valley shall be filled in".

That line of prose is so mundane it might have come from the instruction manual of a JCB operator!

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So in the interests of poetic beauty lets go with the far more elegant King James or Handel version

"Every valley shall be exalted
And every mountain and hill made low"

But again we have to ask the question which I bet the baffled people of ancient Jerusalem must have asked when they first heard these stirring words live from Isaiah a good five centuries before John the Baptist. But what do they mean?

What those ancient people might have grasped is that something extraordinary was about to happen:

Why? Because they had been instinctively and intuitively waiting for it. In some cases — like old Simeon in the temple they had been praying for it.

It being the coming of the Messiah which meant in the words that end our reading "And all mankind will see God's salvation".

"Waiting for the Lord" is one of the most poignant and powerful phrases in the Old Testament.

It occurs many times in The Psalms, perhaps most eloquently in Psalm 130, verse 5.

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"I wait for the Lord. My soul waits
And in his words I put my hope
My soul waits for the Lord
More than the watchmen wait for the morning
More than the watchmen wait for the morning"

In comparison to those watchmen of King David's time we are not a patient generation. We are constantly impatient - to get online. To avoid traffic jams
To cram our schedules with appointments
to hit our targets,
to collect our bonuses
and to move on in our often unnecessarily over busy lives
Delays are usually negative in a commercial world which glorifies the proposition 'time is money'.

But Advent time is different. Its message can be a call for us to slow down.

For Advent is the consecration of waiting in our lives.

Real life is full of waiting
People wait for trains, buses, and planes
They stand in queues in shops
They sit nervously in dentist waiting rooms
They wait anxiously for news of loved ones in hospitals
Faith too can demand long patient waiting
My favourite Advent author, Maria Boulding, puts it this way in her book "The Coming of God".

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"We sometimes have to go on doing the small ordinary things while we wait for God — as Mary did while she waited for the birth of Jesus.

We have to wait for his moment and wait for his work to ripen in ourselves.

It may sometimes be more fruitful if we grow slowly towards wisdom than if we find a quick answer partly dictated by our own desires.

The waiting changes us, schools us, teaches us to know God".

John the Baptist waited and came to know God in the desert.

It is a highly symbolic waiting place.

For sooner or later all of us have our crossings of the desert.

Often they are testing, painful crossings when we are not in control.

They may be period of illness,
loneliness,
bereavement,
broken relationships,
prison sentences,
divorces,
financial or personal crises
or the infirmities of old age.

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When John Milton faced his personal crisis of losing his sight he wrote a sonnet, *On His Blindness* with the much quoted final line:

"They also serve who only stand and wait".

And so indeed they do.

John the Baptist served by waiting in the Wilderness. As Luke 1:80 tells us "he grew and became strong in spirit and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel".

When he began his public ministry, huge crowds came out to hear him.

So what was John's message?

Verse 3 of our reading tells us:

"He went into all the county around the Jordan preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:3).

I worry sometimes that our English language has narrowed the true meaning of the word repentance.

What does that word evoke for you?

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To me, perhaps because my first teachers were nuns, repentance is associated with:

Saying sorry over and over again

Writing out 100 lines

Standing in the corner

Wearing the dunces cap

Doing a penance

Or in the old days wearing sackcloth and ashes

Repentance may be all these things, and certainly saying sorry to God for our sins is crucially important.

But even then you don't get the full richness of the deeper meaning of the word repentance.

That becomes clearer if we go to the original language in which the gospels were written, Greek, and we find this Greek word for repentance is **Meta Noia**

Literally Meta- A Change

Noia – of mind

Perhaps more meaningfully translated as a change of heart and mind.

I'm sure that many of you have attended a child's baptism service — whose liturgical origins come from the ministry of John the Baptist.

And you may remember that quite early in the service the parents, Godparents and others are asked

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"Do you repent of all your sins?"

And in the polite Anglican way of half Christians everyone tends to respond "I repent of all my sins".

But how many of us mean it?

John the Baptist had a test for whether his hearers meant it.

After they had repented and

After he had baptised them

He gave them a command

It is recorded in a few verses further on in Luke Chapter 3 v 8

And it was this

John the Baptist said

"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (8)

Let me offer an illustration of this.

Sixteen years ago I was serving a prison sentence for perjury and I was fortunate enough to get roped in to join a prayer group of prisoners started by a colourful Irish burglar called Paddy.

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We spent some of our nightly sessions going down the Alpha Course mnemonic for prayer ACTS, we talked about that 'C' word – confession and the sins we were sorry for.

It was a pretty colourful conversation.

Because our group recruited by Paddy included

Another Irish burglar

a blagger (an armed robber)

a blower (who cracks safes for a living)

a dipper (a pickpocket)

a wheelman (a getaway driver)

a toolman (who carried a gun on a raid)

a burner (a blackmailer)

a couple of lifers, serving long sentences for murder
and myself.

So we were such an original collection of prayer givers that we gave a new meaning to the term "A Cell Group".

But no one falls so low that they are beneath the reach of God's grace.

So we prayed night after night to clean up our acts of past and present sins.

And to my amazement – oh me of little faith – a number of the young men in this group including Paddy did exactly what John the Baptist had commanded in the Jordanian desert.

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"They produced fruit in keeping with repentance".

Now it may not seem much in respectable Courtfield Gardens' circles but I can assure you it's a big deal in unrespectable Belmarsh convict circles when young men:

stop swearing

throw away their porn magazines

stop being lippy with officers

and stop bullying the pariah prisoners on the wing

The biggest fruit of their repentance of all was when the young men who had drug problems

said "no" to the prison pusher and fought to stay clean.

Often they needed the power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen their resolve to stay clean, but that was all part of the Holy Spirit message proclaimed by John the Baptist.

Perhaps with these reminiscences of prison, and porn, and drug pushers I am taking us rather too far from the traditional cosy world of Advent?

The one that was more or less advertised in the billing of this service in Paul's email when he cheerfully announced:

"Jonathan Aitken will be starting a festive little series in Luke's Gospel".

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Well don't get me wrong. I love the festivities of Advent. I like to Ding Dong Merrily on High as much as anyone else.

But I do think we need to remember, particularly when we focus on what John the Baptist was calling about from the desert that there is also a dark side to Advent.

When we looked at the first two verses of our reading which I labelled "The Historical John" we could see behind it, tyranny brutality and oppression.

For example, Herod the Tetrarch was the Ruler of Galilee who ordered the slaughter of all the new born babies in Bethlehem in his efforts to eliminate the new born Jesus.

The same Herod had John the Baptist beheaded.

And Governor Pontius Pilate was to wash his hands of the blood of Jesus before sending him to die on the Cross.

Oh yes, there was a dark side to the coming of Christ.

And there is a dark side to Advent today.

We still live in a world of

- Beheadings
- Crucifixions
- And terrorist outrages.
- And the brutal persecution and attempted elimination of Christ's followers.

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In our own society, there are painful tensions between the way of the Lord and the way of all flesh.

There are many crooked roads which need to be made straight

And there are legions of the spiritually hungry, those half-hearted Christians who need to be fed.

They need to see the light of Christ, the light of the Advent candle.

They need to hear the call of John the Baptist.

Which brings us, finally and briefly, to the fourth question:

What is the relevance of John's message to us in Advent today?

It is uncomfortable and uncompromising message.

If you feel like getting the full flavour of it, when you go home, read on for the next 10 verses of Luke 3 after our reading ends.

You will find plenty of contemporary wake-up calls such as:

- Share your money with the poor
- Don't cheat financially
- Don't make false accusations
- Be content with your lot in life

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But of course John's most powerful message was:

- Take the road of repenting
- Of Metanoia
- Of changing your heart and mind.

To ram home his message John used some imagery of producing the fruit of repentance that Jesus later developed in a parable about a good tree that bears good fruit (Luke 6: 43-45).

This teaching is central to John's message and Jesus's message.

Of course a life in Christ is much more than simply repentance. But repentance is the essential first step on the way to that life – the way of the Lord.

So at this time of Advent as we wait for the coming of the word made flesh this Christmas

Let us try to follow Isaiah's prophesy and John's command

Prepare the way for the Lord- starting within our own hearts.

Amen