

December 10, 2017 - Isaiah 40 1-11, Mark 1:1-8

This week Henleaze High Street, like many others across the country and the world, has been decorated with lights to prepare for Christmas. Our lights are quite tasteful and restrained, but it made me think about how we approach Christmas in our towns and cities. In Oxford Street, the lights were switched on on 7 November and include falling snow flakes with the whole mile of Oxford Street covered in a blanket of bright white lights and baubles. In Bristol, turning on the lights on 10 November was described in one local news report as “a highlight in the run-up to Crimbo.” which promised “an eye-poppingly magnificent display of shimmering incandescence.” Of course, we are right to celebrate with joy and light the birth of baby Jesus, God’s gift to mankind. But, I can’t help wondering what John the Baptist would have made of the way we prepare our streets for Christmas today.

Mark chooses to begin the story of Jesus’ life on earth, not with the story of his birth and early life, but by referring back to the words of the Prophet Isaiah to the Jewish people in exile in Babylon. “Prepare the way for the Lord. Make his paths straight.” It seems fitting that Mark chooses a road for his metaphor to announce the arrival of The Messiah. Reading through the Gospels we see that Jesus life began with a journey to Bethlehem and that he travelled throughout his ministry meeting people along the way and attending to their needs. He befriends a woman he meets at a well on a journey through Samaria. While he was on the way to heal Jairus’ daughter, he stopped to minister to another woman who had touched his cloak as he passed by. Jesus stories too often involve meetings on roads. Think of the Good Samaritan stopping to help a stranger on the road to Jericho, or the Father running to greet the returning prodigal son. We learn of encounters with the risen Christ on The Road to Emmaus when two disciples met and talked with Jesus and on the Road to Damascus where Paul had his dramatic conversion.

A road is a point of connection, a way to pass from one place to another, a meeting between cultures. From his austere lifestyle in the wilderness, John the Baptist foretells the meeting of the divine and the human through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. His message is of a highway connecting the wilderness experience of those who don’t know God to the place of belonging, living with Jesus in our midst.

Many people responded to this message. Mark tells us that “the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him” wanting to hear more. Luke describes the people, questioning in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. John soon puts them straight explaining that he was a messenger and that someone more powerful was to follow. To be ready for the Messiah, John said that the people must repent and be baptised. As we journey through advent we too prepare to remember God’s remarkable intervention through the birth of Jesus Christ. Whether this is for the first time or the 101st time, it is an opportunity to examine ourselves, our priorities and our motivations and bring them before God. We can learn a little more about what John means from the passage in Isaiah and from the other Gospel accounts. In ancient times, before a king made a journey, the roads he would travel were improved. Isaiah makes reference to this in his prophesy. Anticipating imminent liberation from exile in Babylon, Isaiah describes a glorious return to Jerusalem as God leads the Jewish people home. He repeats this idea again in chapter 57:14 when he says, “*Build up! Build up! Prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.*” But here, there is a slight change in emphasis. Obstacles are to be cleared, not only for the king, but to ease the way for everyone passing through. God himself, doesn’t need a clear path, he will meet us wherever we are; The psalmist says, “*Where can I go from your spirit, where can I flee your presence.*” (Ps

139,) In Romans, Paul says, *“Neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:39.)

Christ is coming. We need to remove obstacles, repent and turn to Christ so that we are ready to recognise and meet him. Luke’s account of John’s message gives some examples of how we might approach this. When John is questioned by members of the crowd, his answers emphasize the need to act justly and to look out for those less fortunate than themselves. As we move towards Christmas, we too should reflect on the obstacles that stand between us and Christ? What stones have to be removed or replaced so that we can meet with Christ this Christmas time?

Maybe there are relationships which are damaged which need to be put back in order. The dynamics of families and friendship groups change as new members are added and others are no longer with us. Sometimes the world can just seem a little out of kilter and you need to adjust your perspective to see the way ahead. Perhaps you find your priorities caught up in the busyness and materialism of modern life and you can see that you are starting to head in a wrong direction. Maybe you are concerned about the way the world is headed, politically, environmentally or socially and feel helpless and overwhelmed by so much need. Or perhaps this year there is something different about the Christmas story for you. This year you find you are meeting Jesus in a more relevant and personal way and you want to find out more. These are all examples, you may have obstacles that are completely different. The important thing is that we act on them by talking or praying. That we bring them to Christ so that our own path is clear and straight.

Once we have reflected on our personal response to the coming season, we should also remember that Isaiah, was talking to a community in exile. Had John the Baptist walked through Cabot Circus yesterday, what would he have made of our community? I’m certain he would have remarked that our streetlights and decorations lead the way to the shops, not Christ. He would have been angry at the excess and the pressure people are under to overspend and over eat. He would have been saddened that the bright lights and festivities hide the homeless in doorways and the lonely behind closed doors. But I believe he would have taken hope from the fact that at this time of year, Christ does enter into our mainstream culture in a way that doesn’t happen at other times. It is the season of goodwill. Charities run Christmas appeals, families and friends make an effort to come together and heal broken relationships. Adverts tell stories of bringing together those who are lonely or far away. Singers join in heartily with carols, or a Messiah from scratch, dredging the harmonies from somewhere deep in their memories.

For many people, even if they don’t share the Christian faith, the story of Jesus’s birth is an important part of their celebrations. Maybe they feel they have a gap or yearning in their lives which needs filling. People make the effort to find a place for Jesus and the values he represents. You only need to be in this building for the Carol Service or at one of the Christmas Eve Crib Services to experience this. John the Baptist tells us that Jesus baptises with the Holy Spirit. That Holy Spirit can nurture the seeds planted this Christmas time so that obstacles can be removed, gaps can be filled and the yearning met. Advent truly is a time when two cultures collide. This is something we should embrace and celebrate. What are we doing to point the way clearly and without obstacles towards Jesus at Christmas time? How good are we at making his presence felt? How do we make people feel welcomed and informed? How are they encouraged to return?

I will finish with a description from the American News Channel CNBC of preparations on Christmas Eve last year in a certain town in another part of the world where recent events have led to uncertainty and an increased threat of violence.

“Thousands of pilgrims and tourists from around the world together with local Christians gathered in the biblical town of Bethlehem to celebrate Christmas eve in the traditional birthplace of Jesus, with spirits lifted by a slowdown in recent violence and cool, clear weather. Security was tight in Bethlehem after recent deadly attacks on Christian targets in neighboring Egypt and Jordan by Islamic extremists. Yet the faithful braved the chilly weather outside the town's Manger Square as traditional Christmas songs like "Jingle Bells" played in Arabic over loudspeakers and scout groups paraded with bagpipes and sang carols. Elated tourists and local Christians alike wandered around the square illuminated by festive red and golden lights and a large Christmas tree, visiting souvenir shops and restaurants.”

As we journey towards Christmas both as individuals and in community, I urge you to keep in mind this tension between the earthly way and the divine. Enjoy this meeting place, it shows that God is at work in our towns and cities throughout the world. I ask you to pray that the Holy Spirit will break through in Bethlehem and Henleaze in our homes and in our hearts. Jesus is coming. Let's make sure our pathway is clear and open to receive him.

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