

Reflection for Advent 2 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

We must all have come across couples or even objects that somehow only seem right when they are together. If one is missing, it just does not feel right. This may be true of certain married couples or people whose lives have been closely intertwined over many years. As a boy I remember having two elderly aunts. We always referred to them as The Aunties. They were always together - think of one and you would automatically think of the other. The same is also true in the world of entertainment – Morecambe & Wise, Ant & Dec or people and phrases Basil Brush - “Boom Boom!”, John McEnroe - “You cannot be serious!” or Corpral Jones “Don’t panic Mr Mannering!”. Just a few examples.

But who, or what would you link in the same way with John the Baptist? First impressions may be nothing, but one answer is Isaiah chapter 40. We may not think of that link in quite in the same way, but it is very clearly there. Mention John the Baptist and I expect for many of us we automatically have these words coming in our minds *“Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”*

All four gospels quote these words in one form or another as they lay at the very heart of John’s ministry, yet they come from Isaiah 40. Without maybe us even realizing it a link has been created between the figure of John, and the Old Testament prophets.

John’s ministry is one that provides a bridge back into the Old Testament, you could describe him as the last of the Old Testament prophets. However he is also a figure who looks forward - very much part of God’s salvation plan, part of God stepping into history, giving his own son, “God with us”; Jesus’ birth, ministry, death and resurrection.

John, this somewhat strange figure, bridging and linking the Old and the New is a reminder to us of the importance, during the Advent season not only to hear the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the messiah, but also to look at them in more depth, because they help us to understand who Jesus is and how he fits into the expectations of a coming Messiah.

Spend a moment reading again the beginning of Isaiah 40

Isaiah chapter 40 marks a turning point in the book. Up to it the book contains a series of prophecies which were directed towards the nation of Judah and its leaders, living in Jerusalem prior to its capture and the beginning of the period of exile.

As chapter 40 begins the scene moves forward both in time and place. The message is now coming, not to those in Jerusalem, but to the community exiled in Babylon - a group of people who have seen their city fall, their positions in society taken from them. They have been forced into living in a strange land, probably by this time in their second or third generation. A group of people who have not only seen their physical world laid in ruins, with little or no hope of repair, but their spiritual world too. They are left with a question:

Why has God abandoned us to this fate?

It is here that the prophet provides a glimpse into the heavenly councils. God has taken counsel and now instructs three heavenly messengers to bring comfort to his people in the hopelessness of exile.

The first of these messages lies at the heart of John the Baptist’s ministry years later

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

This is a call to hope, preparation and expectation. The Lord will return, and his glory shall be revealed. There is hope for the future, hope that is rooted in God. The call, though, is not just that the people sit and wait: they are called to prepare for this new future, to begin the process of reconstruction.

The contrasting image is developed between the harsh and unpromising landscape of the wilderness, with its winding twisty roads, that lay between Babylon and Jerusalem, and a highway fit for God to travel - a processional way. The challenge is to begin building that road ready for the arrival of the Lord. It is a call for a total transformation in preparation for God’s coming in power and glory.

If that call was to a people in exile the question then remains: why does John pick up this prophecy years later and

relate it to himself, when the period of exile was over, and the people are back in Jerusalem?

For the Jewish people of John's and Jesus' period there was a very real question Had the exile had ever really ended? Had the promises found in Isaiah been fulfilled. They may be back in their homeland, yet for almost the entire period since they had been under the rule of foreign powers. The freedom they had dreamed of and the rule of God appeared never to have arrived.

John understands this. He looks forward and calls the people once again to repent and prepare for God's coming - the coming, as we see, of Christ.

It is a message that highlights several points.

First, to look forward with both hope and confidence. In so much of life it is all too easy to get despondent and to give up, and that in recent years has never been truer than in 2020. The message is don't do that, God has decided to act and when he does everybody will be aware of it.

Secondly, it does not hide from the fact that the project ahead is massive. Imagine the work, the planning, the money involved in building a new motorway - twinning the A96, for example.

The task is enormous, and we are called to play our part in God's project.

It involves repentance, and not just individually but also collectively: giving up that which gets in the way of the task in hand; preparing the way of the Lord.

It involves commitment, sticking with things through both ups and downs.

It can involve at times being like John, that lone voice calling in the wilderness, trying to reshape the agenda.

Hope, repentance and commitment: these are the three things that are tied together in the message of John and three things that should be part of our journey of faith.

"A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."