

Well folks, last week saw us come to the end of our series on the Book of Nehemiah which I hope you enjoyed. We're now on the run up to Christmas Day and we are reflecting on the period of Advent, a period of preparation for the coming of Jesus.

When I think about preparation I think about my 10 years of travelling to England each week for my job. It didn't take too long until I had the packing on a Sunday night down to a fine art. I could have all the shirts & trousers and clothes packed in 10 mins ready to go for another week away. In fact when it then came to the family packing for holidays, I would often turn up at the last minute and have my packing done while Alison and Josh were trying to get everything into the case. I had just become so used to preparing that I didn't have to think about it.

Today we are thinking about preparation from another perspective, because we are going to look at John the Baptist, this mysterious figure who comes as the forerunner to Jesus and then quickly disappears. He appears in the desert and proclaims a message of repentance, warning the people of the coming Messiah. Now I realise that in the run-up to Christmas it might seem strange to think about a rough looking guy like John when instead we should be thinking about Mary & Joseph as they prepare for the baby's arrival. But what Advent is all about is to make us think more about whether we are completely prepared for the coming Lord, and whether we are sharing with others (our family members, our friends) their need to discover Jesus, and these are the points I want us to think about today.

Well what about John? He's out in the wilderness and people from all over are coming to him to be baptised, to say that they were renewing themselves for a commitment to God. But why did he live in the wilderness, why did he have a peculiar diet? Well it's because he had deliberately dropped out of society. He had got off the hamster wheel, away from all the material attractions, and instead he is only eating what God directly provides from the land. And even with the strange look and the strange diet, people flock from all over. In today's 21st Century Christian Church arena, the picture of John doesn't sit very well. Many churches today feel they have to go with the lights and trendy speaker to attract a new crowd. And yet John removes himself from all of this, and speaks with wisdom that comes from the Lord. He was someone outside the everyday, self-centered rhythms of human society who was calling for something very new and something very old at the same time. He fulfils the words of the prophet Isaiah as he prepares the way of the Lord, and ensures that the path for his return is straight.

John was an evangelist, but why were so many angry at him? Why does he eventually get his head on a plate in front of Herod? Well it's because he's baptising Jews. He's converting those who society considers as already converted. He was calling his people back to the ways of God to prepare for the movement of God, and he was doing so in the boldest, rawest way possible—he's telling them they have to start all over again.

BEING REAL WITH JESUS

It's a bit like what I've been calling for under RESET. Some of you have been members of this parish all your life - you know no different. But all of us need to have that period, that Advent preparation, to review whether we have made the church into a thing that scratches an itch – we do the services, we have the programmes,

everyone's happy. You say you know Jesus, but what does that mean? Let me give you an example. I was saying to someone the other day, that they know my Alison, but only I know her really well. Some have a head knowledge of Alison, but I have a heart knowledge. It's the same with Jesus. Everyone of us have a head knowledge. We know who he is. But that's not enough. We have to know him in our hearts, that he shapes our everyday life, that we are to be devoted to him deeply. And therefore for some here today, it's time to go back to square one. Like John it offends people when they are told to go back to basics, but that's what John was doing with the Jewish people.

John was disrupting the system. He was stripping away the old order of things in order that an authentic relationship with God could be re-established. And that wasn't comfortable. Nor is it comfortable today. Some may say, just let me do my church thing each Sunday, I'll put the money on the plate to keep things good between me and the big-man. But the voice from the wilderness disrupts, it shakes us, it gets our attention and it says "There's more to life than this. There's more to God than the religious practice."

Christmas can actually be a sad time of the year for me, because it has become something that it should never be. Immanuel comes as God in human form, not for us to gaze at, but for us to be invited into a living life-changing relationship with God himself. That's the real gift of Christmas. Life doesn't depend on whether we get the new X-Box, or the new air fryer. Life depends on Jesus who is the hope of the world. John calls out to those of us who know there is something wrong, something missing, and he says it's time to reconnect with the living God.

So the question is this – can you honestly say that you have brought Jesus into your heart and he is all you need in your life. This Advent is a great opportunity to prepare space in the busyness of this season and draw close to Jesus once again.

A TIME TO CHANGE

And so where does that take us to? Well I think when we recognise our need to rediscover Jesus, we have to look inside ourselves and consider what needs to change in life so that he can be Lord of your life. Time and time again in my life, the way in which I most often push the Lord out is when I let the busyness of life, the commitments, the agenda, the meetings to become my focus. And whilst I have wanted things to change in my mind, the change really only becomes the change when my heart and my actions reflect it. So is God to you today speaking in some way to make that recommitment, that RESET. Maybe one way that the change can be exercised is by committing to our ALPHA course in the New Year. Alpha is a great opportunity to gather in a very safe place and hear the story of Jesus, to ask the questions you've always wanted to ask and be with others in the same position. Use this Advent season to examine where you are in your heart and as we move into the New Year make a fresh commitment.

John provoked people to reconsider their position, and as they became honest with themselves a revival broke out. Do you know something, a revival could so easily come to this town if we had people being totally honest with themselves and honest with God – that's all it takes. And I guarantee you that as your life is changed, those

around you, seeing the change in you will respond. A spiritual revival doesn't just change people, it changes a community.

I love the story of a gentleman called William Haslam who was a 19th century English country parson. In those days, clergy-selection and training was perhaps not as rigorous as it is today, and so in 1842 Haslam found himself leading a church in Truro without actually being a Christian. His congregation at the time contained many from a Methodist background and their regular testimonies about conversion, and the fruit he saw of it in their lives, affected him deeply, because he knew something was missing from his life. He had no heart for his role, there was dissension in his congregation, and it was getting to the point where he knew he might have to close the church due to hardly anyone coming to it.

In his torment, Haslam wrote "I endured the greatest agony of mind for the souls I had misled, though I had done it ignorantly". And so he was honest in his heart, and decided it was time to preach one final sermon in which he would announce he could no longer preach, that he was a hypocrite, and that he would dismiss the congregation.

At the service he was listening to the Gospel reading, and decided to say a few words about it. And it was at that point that something truly amazing happened. Here are his own words, "*I do not remember all I said, but I felt a wonderful light and joy coming into my soul, and I was beginning to see what the Pharisees did not. Whether it was in my words, or my manner, or my look, I know not; but all of a sudden, a local preacher, who happened to be in the congregation, stood up, and putting up his arms, shouted out in Cornish fashion, "The parson is converted! The parson is converted! Hallelujah!"*". Haslam had been converted by his own sermon.

He went on to say "I joined in the outbreak of praise, and then gave out the Doxology – "Praise God from whom all blessings flow", and the people sang it over and over again." As the uproar subsided he found at least 20 people crying out for mercy, including three from his own family.

The spiritual revival that followed Haslam's spiritual awakening lasted three years – and a great many were saved in the region.

Have you today lost the excitement of knowing the Lord Jesus? I pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit, your heart will be stirred to come again in commitment to Him. Maybe as a result of today you decide that you want to recommit your life to Jesus in a public declaration and so come and speak with me at the end, I can pray with you.

SHARING WITH OTHERS

Just before we finish, I want to conclude by speaking into your heart if you feel there are situations maybe in your family or work place or amongst friends where you need like John to share the message of the Gospel to them. Do you need to know the Lord's encouragement as you maybe step out for the first time and talk to that person about the Christian faith?

Well let's look at how John approached this call.

Firstly recognise that in order for John to be directed effectively by God he needed to remove himself from other worldly influences. He lived out in the wilderness, eating and clothing himself with only what God provided. For us that requires a lot of discipline. So in order for us to speak into a person's life, maybe it's a member of our family, we must be determined to walk closely ourselves with the Lord every day and ensure we don't allow other worldly desires to invade our time. We will never bring a person to the Lord if we think it relies on our clever words. It is so much about the Spirit of God working in us, and so if we are not walking closely with the Lord ourselves, then the Spirit of God will not be given the freedom to work in us. I'm not saying that he can't work in us unless we ourselves are close to him, but I do think that he delights when we as servants are open and aware of his prompting.

The other thing that John did was to not take up the spotlight. In John 3:30 John says these words which everyone in leadership should take on board. He said, "He must increase, I must decrease". In other words I must glorify God and not myself. When God starts changing hearts, we give him the spotlight immediately. A great statement many Christians throughout history have used is this: "It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge, and my job to love." The most important thing John the Baptist ever said, in the right circumstances and in the right moment, was good-bye. He prepared the way, and when Christ came, he got out of the way. We know very little about him after that, and that was exactly the way he wanted it.

So maybe for you today, the life of John the Baptist has provoked you into deciding about your own life and where you are with God. John was rather direct, and maybe today I need to do the same as I say to you, "This Christmas, come back to Jesus, he loves you and he wants you to turn away from everything in your life that frankly is worldly, turn to him, and know him as the only thing you need in your life".

Or maybe today as you have considered the life of John, you are thinking about how you can be a voice speaking into people's lives around you, either in your family, your friends or your work. Commit yourself like John to a life dedicated to the service of the Lord. Dedicate those you know to the Lord and then be guided by his Holy Spirit. Now is the time to begin inviting them to Alpha. In a week's time we will be able to provide you with invitation postcards to allow that conversation take place. For everyone of us who calls ourselves a Christian, this is your primary role. John came to prepare the way for Jesus' coming. We are called to prepare the way for Jesus' second coming. Let's not ignore. God wants to use everyone of us for his purposes of drawing more people to him.

Whether you come for the first time seeking him, or whether you come with a desire to call others, I encourage you to not miss this opportunity over Christmas. This Advent prepare for the way of the Lord.

Study questions

1. We talked about John the Baptist as the “voice speaking from the wilderness”—someone who dropped out of society so he could hear from God and speak for God. How do you think him going “off the grid” helped him fulfill this role?
2. John removed himself into the wilderness. What do you believe are the specific things that we could do to be less influenced by the world around us, and to become centred on the Lord.
3. John got into trouble for baptizing those who were already Jewish. This was a highly offensive symbolic act that disrupted society. Does God still use disruption—of society and our own lives—to speak to us?
4. How is God getting our attention this Advent? Is there somewhere he’s calling us to “prepare the way” for him in our own lives, those we know and in our community?
5. When Jesus arrives—in our lives, our churches, and our communities—how do we “decrease”? How do we let him take the stage?