

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.”

John 1: 6 – 8

Dear Friends,

Last week I wrote about the comfort and strength that God can bring to our lives to enable us to face the things we have to face and to do the things we need to do, based on some words from Isaiah 40. In that passage, Isaiah says, *“A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”*

In the extended Gospel passage for this week, of which the verses above are a part, John the Baptist uses those words of Isaiah to describe his ministry: *“I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”*

John didn't come to do God's work, he came to prepare the way for God to work. John didn't come as the Light, he came to bare witness to the Light. It is an interesting, if often overlooked, distinction. We can be so busy, especially during Advent in the run up to Christmas, doing what we think is the work of God. But I wonder if we have maybe missed the point a little. Yes, absolutely, God lives in and works through us as we open ourselves up to the promptings of the Spirit. After all, as St Paul, regularly reminds us, we are *“in Christ”* and *“Christ lives in”* us.

But I think there is a fundamental point to make here that John the Baptist points us towards and it is this: the work of God in the world does not depend on me, or you! God is present and active, everywhere, always. God is not limited to what God can do in and through me or you. God is always working to make all things new. It is God's work, God's mission, God's responsibility! And only God knows the way and the outcome and only God has the resources for the task. But God, in infinite wisdom and grace, calls ordinary human beings to partner in that mission to *“make all things new.”*

Beginning with Adam and Eve's calling to be stewards of creation and continuing right through Scripture to Jesus' final words to his disciples: *“you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth,”* God has always called people to be partners in the mission to witness to God's glory and love.

At Christmas we celebrate God's coming into this world in a very particular way, through the birth of Jesus – we call it the Incarnation. But actually, God is continually

coming into the world through the work of the Spirit, and we seem to have a twin role in that, identified for us by John the Baptist.

First, we are called to “*prepare the way*”. And second, we are called to “*bear witness*.” These days, perhaps more than ever before, we Christians must earn the right to be listened to. People often need to see faith in action – faith making a difference – before they are prepared to listen to the content of the Gospel.

Now it could be argued that faith in action and the content of the Gospel are one and the same thing – there is always that relationship between love for God and love for our neighbour. But increasingly, it seems to me, we must “*prepare the way*” before we are able to “*bear witness*.” We must build open, honest, transparent, and loving relationships with our local communities before people will listen to what we have to say. We must live out the Gospel message with no strings attached and love people just for the sake of loving them rather than to get them into our church buildings. We must be people of integrity rather than ones with ulterior motives.

For John, preparing the way was expressed through calling the people back to their identity as people of God. Interestingly he called people out into the wilderness away from the religious centre of Jerusalem. It is often in the wilderness that old habits die off and space is given for new things to come to life. For John, bearing witness to the Light was expressed through true humility and a recognition that the Light of the world shines most brightly when the Spirit of God is given free rein in peoples’ lives.

But I wonder what preparing the way and bearing witness to the Light might look like for us, now, in this moment in time? How can or are we preparing the way for God’s glory to be seen in our covid-infested, austerity-burdened world? What might God be asking us to call our communities’ and society’s attention back to? Dare we be ever so slightly prophetic in this season and speak up for the marginalised? And how can or are we bearing witness to the Light? What do our actions and our words reveal to those around us of the love and grace of God? Will we humble our need to be the centre of attention and instead allow the Spirit to guide and direct our paths?

When we are clear about what it means to prepare the way and bear witness to the Light, then I think God truly is incarnate in this world through the way that each one of us lives.

Every Blessing,
Rev Tim