

Every few weeks here in St Mary's we celebrate the sacrament of Baptism, that sacrament of welcome, of commitment as a new child is welcomed into the fellowship of the Church.. As I reflect with parents and godparents on the promises of Baptism, which are in themselves profound and challenging, I observe that these are questions not of people who have arrived but of people who are on a journey, a journey of a lifetime; a journey of faith, a journey into faith.

We have now started the season of Advent. The décor of Church changes as we move into this season of preparation, the lighting of the Advent Candles serves as a reminder of the impending Festival of Christmas.

One of the central characters of our readings during this season is that of John the Baptist and his vocation to prepare the way. In a ministry marked by a call to repentance, he challenges his hearers, challenges the religious establishment of his day to recognise the signs of the imminence of the Kingdom of God.

In their description of John, the Gospel writers are making a clear connection with words of the prophet Isaiah:

³ A voice cries out:

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

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." *Isaiah 40:3ff*

There is a sense of expectation; the days of judgement are over, Jerusalem has paid double for all her sins. The Exile is drawing to a close, there is to be a new entry into the promised Land; God with his people

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

And so the season of Advent carries with it a sense of anticipation, not just of Christmas, but of encounter with God.

Prepare the way of the Lord – in the hearts and minds of God's people. A call to witness – in our lives, in attitudes and actions showing something of the Christ we seek to serve. The Church, the Body of Christ, called to be a community of the Kingdom, a community expressing in its own common life the values of reconciliation, of justice, of compassion that it commends to the world at large.

In John's account of the Last Supper, as Jesus talks to the disciples of his own coming death, his going to the Father, he speaks of his role of going ahead of them and then returning.

³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again
and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you
may be also. *John 14:3*

In the Palestinian society of that day, when one of the main means of long distance transport was the camel train, there was one who was hired to go ahead of the camel train to find a suitable camping place for the night, where there would be fresh water and shelter, and then return to guide the camel train to their place of rest for the night. John presents us with that picture of Jesus as our guide along the way, going ahead of us, bringing us on further on the

journey of life. But there is more to it than that. In that same portion of John's Gospel, as Thomas asks in some confusion where he is going, Jesus replies with one of those great 'I am' sayings, 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' Jesus, both the companion along the way and also the one to whom I travel, the focus of my hope; the one in whom and through whom I find hope and meaning in my life.

Let us look at a verse from our Psalm this morning, Ps 25:4

4 Lead me in your | truth and | teach me, @
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you have I | hoped | all the day | long.

Even in the midst of all life's trials, the Psalmist is confident of God's presence with him. This is echoed in words of the late Lord Hailsham towards the end of his book 'A sparrow's flight' in which he speaks of his own conviction:

But he is himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. he is unknown and unknowable, yet constantly revealed, revealed in nature, in beauty, in goodness, in knowledge, but always absent in the negative, the hated and the hateful. He is always present yet constantly eludes my grasp. Being infinite, he cannot be comprised in my understanding. Nevertheless as constantly he reappears in my need. Remaining Christian, I am constantly reassured in my wandering, in my doubting and as constantly lead back by my trusting. I do not know. I do not pretend to know. But I trust, and therefore I believe.

Advent, with its theme of preparation, or preparing the way for the coming of Christ, reminds me of our own vocation, both as individuals and as a community to be signs along the way of the Kingdom of God, that fellow travellers along the road of life, in all its ups and downs, may see in us something of Christ, something of God breaking through into the world.