

Part of the folk lore of the United States is the figure of Paul Revere. He is famous for an overnight ride he undertook during the course of the American War of Independence. In the course of this he rode across the countryside, warning the Minute men, groups fighting Britain for independence, of the impending arrival of British troops. As he rode up to each homestead of the Minute men he shouted out ‘The British are coming!, The British are coming!’ and then rode on to his next destination.

His was a warning of danger and there was an urgency to his cry. The people he came to responded immediately and in the ensuing battle the entire course of the American War of Independence was changed.

The herald, the bringer of news, plays an essential role in the Bible. The prophets themselves were first and foremost heralds of God, with a clear awareness that they had been sent by God to proclaim his message to his people. Often that message was of judgement. Like the message of Paul Reverre there was an urgency to it – the people had to respond there and then if they were to avoid the catastrophe that was otherwise to result from their disregard of God’s Law.

There was also a message of promise to a people suffering in bondage. That, the God who their forefathers had disregarded, loved them and had a purpose for their particular generation. This is the message we are reading in our lessons from Isaiah during this season of Advent. It is a message to a people living in exile in Babylon in the midst of a powerful empire. Any hope of a return to Jerusalem must have seemed futile. To them the prophet is called to announce that their time of suffering is over, that the Lord himself is going to bring them back into the Promised Land.

Set in the context of this hope, there is a call to be faithful to the things of God. The things that seem so important, so relevant, our wealth, our prestige, even our health, are but transitory. We are birds of passage on this earth. In determining the course and priorities of our lives we must not let the transitory, the immediate deflect us from the urgency of the eternal.

Our Gospel readings have reflected on the ministry of John the Baptist – there was a similar urgency to his own message. In the Gospel accounts, he sees himself as the herald, as the forerunner of the Messiah, proclaiming the need to prepare there and then to receive the Messiah, calling upon those who are prepared to listen, ‘Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas it is a good time to reflect on our role, as individuals, as heralds of the kingdom in our own generation. Our homes should be heralds of the Kingdom of God. Places in which not only is Christ known but made known in every aspect of our lives; places in which features of Jesus’ humanity, his compassion, his self-giving, his concern for what is right, are drawn out from members of the household; places in which our children are drawn into the kingdom and encouraged to adopt the priorities of the kingdom as their own. So our homes have to be places in which we make time to listen, time to welcome – our friends, our family, the lonely. For in so doing we welcome Christ himself.

In the context of our Church, it is not enough just to maintain our buildings. These too have to be heralds of the Kingdom, places of meeting with Christ. Places in which he is sought, in which he is welcomed. Places in which we encourage each other as we seek to find our place in the kingdom, places in which our young people are encouraged to search for God’s purpose in their lives. Our worship must have a sense of urgency about it, in our attendance, in our preparation, and in our participation.

May we go out from this place today thinking about how we can fulfil our roles as forerunners, as heralds of the kingdom. How in our homes we can make them places where people are drawn into the Kingdom, how in our participation in worship we can make our worship a time of meeting with the risen Lord; and how in all this we can seek to ensure that in our home life and in our Church life the things of God are not swept aside by the things of the world.