

Second Sunday of Advent – 8 December 2024

Message – God prepares the way

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, prepare the way for us that we may walk with you, now and always. **Amen.**

Listening to today's gospel passage, it struck me that the way was also prepared for John the Baptist. John was preparing the way for Jesus but for John's message to be received the people must have been ready to hear it.

We are tempted to think of a long silence between the last of the prophets and the New Testament. Yet, there were writings and prophets in those in-between times. Our first reading was from one of the books written in that period. And, we know that the expectations of the Hebrew people were evolving. They expected a messiah and that the messiah's path would start in the wilderness.

Luke portrays John the Baptist as having an itinerant ministry in the wilderness areas along the River Jordan. When John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, the hearts of the Jewish people were open to the possibility; they were waiting expectantly. Without such expectation it is hard to imagine that the message of John the Baptist would have gone down very well.

We will hear the message more fully next week. But, at the heart we have *'Repent [that is turn around] and be ritually washed clean.'* Were any of us to wander along the mighty Waikato making such a proclamation it is unlikely that we would attract crowds that wanted to hear us, never mind that wanted to turn their lives around and be ritually

washed clean.

The way has simply not been prepared for the message in such a form. We start from a very different place in our call to draw people into the love of God. We have to start wherever it is that God has prepared for us. Identifying that place is challenging. We may have to, metaphorically, push a few doors to find the path that God has set for us.

It is not that people today do not have desire for something different, particularly when life is tough or even falling apart. Rather, it is that they are not looking for an answer, in the wilderness, in the church, in any institution, nor in any of countless places where people have traditionally looked for something deeper and more life giving.

This leaves us as followers of Christ with a difficulty. It is perhaps not a new difficulty. The church grew quickly from being a Jewish sect to being a movement that welcomed all people. There are significant differences between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that reflect their different audiences. In today's reading, for example, Luke uses more of the quotation from Isaiah, going all the way until he gets to *'and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*

Luke sees his work as being a part of ensuring that all people hear of God's salvation. In turn, what are we doing, in our generation, to ensure that all people hear of God's salvation? Sitting here, on this sacred hill, people will not generally just come to us. No clergy team, no matter how gifted can do it either. It is the work of the whole church. Each and everyone of us has our part to play.

No one here can do it all. We cannot even see how the

church will evolve or how the Kingdom of God will come about. We build on the foundations of past generations and provide the foundations for future generations. We at best have partial sight of this season of the kingdom.

There is a beautiful prayer called prophets of a future not our own. I have read it to you before, ask me if you would like a copy though you will easily find it on the web. It was part of a sermon preached to clergy reflecting on their ministry. As a church that believes in the priesthood of all believers, that every baptised person is called to serve God in her or his own unique way, as a church that believes this, the prayer applies to all of us.

Each of us has been given gifts and talents with which to serve God. God calls us to seek out our calling and where we might use those gifts and talents. This requires humility. What we perceive to be our gifts and talents may not be all that we thought that they were.

More significantly, it requires the support of each one of us as a member of the Body of Christ to encourage others. None of us gets everything right first time.

My first reading in church was done at supper human speed, remarkable because I can't normally read that fast even in my head. I knew it was bad but no one criticised, one person just said, '*You'd be welcome to practice out loud for the next time.*' I still get nervous.

Some of us have amazing innate skills or skills that we have acquired in other contexts. It can take time to work out how these fit into the context of the church or of outreach to others. But it is worth the effort. God has given us these

gifts and we can bless others through them.

Some things require development, practice, reflection and encouragement. For example, no one knows how to be a churchwarden or a vestry member before they take on the role. We have an outline of responsibilities in the statutes but there are many different ways of achieving the outcomes and not a lot of guidance or support for the best ways though the diocese is working on this.

The ways in which we can use our gifts and talents for building the kingdom of God are as numerous as the members of the church. Some of those ways will be within the church, some of those ways will be beyond the walls of the church, unique to our own contexts.

I have yet to hear how anyone is going to grow their prayer or action life in the coming year, the question I asked you last week. It would be lovely to hear from a few of you.

This week, I invite you to think about how you can use your gifts and talents to help build the kingdom of God. This involves all of us working together. None of us can do this alone and even the things we can progress alone, for them to be ultimately fruitful, need the support of others.

I was struck as a curate that all the previous curates had done remarkable things, yet none of those things had continued. Here, we have had many remarkable deans but only a few of the remarkable things they did have become an integral part of the life of this community.

In some cases, this is because things have their season, which we must recognise and accept. The world around us is ever changing and the community of Hamilton is changing

fast. We need to notice the seasons.

However, for many things to be life giving and fully effective, they need to reflect the calling of a wide range of members of the church community. I confess to having my pet projects and passions but there are many other things for which I don't have the talent or passion but which I hope all of us would support because we can see that they would be good for the life of church and would help others to hear the simple message that God loves them.

We need to share our ideas and our dreams. The outcome will not always be the one we anticipated. Sometimes, others will suggest ways of improving on our ideas or of making them easier to achieve. Sometime, others will note our gift or talent and suggest another way of using it that we hadn't considered. Sometimes, after discussion, we may conclude that now is not the time for an idea. And sometimes, an idea will capture people's imagination and create something new and unexpected.

So, this week I really want you to think about and share with me your ideas and the gifts and talents you would like to be making use of, in the church or in our wider community.

We have a vision and mission statement developed over the course of the last two years of vestry. You will find it on the cover of our newsletter. The next step is to consider what actions and activities might move us towards the vision.

We need to find where God has prepared our way and we need one another to be fully all we can be and to walk that way.

Prophets of a Future Not Our Own

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete,

which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,

and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,

an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,

but that is the difference between the master

builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

This prayer was first presented by Cardinal Dearden in 1979 and quoted by Pope Francis in 2015. This reflection is an excerpt from a homily written for Cardinal Dearden by then-Fr. Ken Untener on the occasion of the Mass for Deceased Priests, October 25, 1979. Pope Francis quoted Cardinal Dearden in his remarks to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2015. Fr. Untener was named bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, in 1980.

Te Whare Karakia Matua Ki Waikato

The Waikato Cathedral Church of St Peter

Vision

A world where we live in harmony with creation and all people, and where every person is treasured as a beloved child of God and a reflection of God's good creation.

Mission

A transformative community of love and service; Christ-centred, we seek fullness of life for creation, society, and individuals, as we journey together in faith.

Values

We aspire to be:

- Inclusive of all
- ⊕ A three tikanga church building relationships with tikanga Maaori and tikanga Pacifica
- Welcoming, Caring, and Supportive of friend and stranger
- Reflective, Prophetic, and Engaged with the world
- Rooted in Anglican tradition
- A spiritual home for the Diocese of Waikato and Taranaki

To move forward we need to focus on:

Mission... || Maintenance... || Finance...