



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Follow the Way

Mark 1:1-8; 2 Peter 3:8-11-15a; Isaiah 40:1-11

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Advent – what is it about? Is it a time to prepare for Christmas? You know, there is all that flurry of shopping; there are the end of year functions to attend. Is Advent just to get us to think about a manger with a particular baby in it?

Today's reading helps bring Advent into focus for us. A herald is sent to tell people to be ready just before Jesus starts his public ministry. We also hear about the Day of the Lord which will bring to a close the world as we know it.

Remember the word, "Advent," means coming. It is the season when we focus on the first and second comings of Christ - not so much the infant Jesus as the adult Jesus.

Mark's gospel starts with these words,

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"-- ³ "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" ⁴ And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The good news about Jesus, as far as Mark is concerned starts with his proclamation to the people. It doesn't matter what he looked like, what town he came from, his CV and educational record – Jesus bursts onto the scene and the good news starts.

However, he did not come out of the blue. No, he came out of the blueprint! God had a plan and sent Jesus as he had promised long before. So Mark quotes Isaiah – actually he joins together three quotations:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way," is a combination of:

Malachi 3:1, "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me," with Exodus 23:20, "See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared."

Then the quotation from Isaiah 40:3:

A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."

In that way, Mark shows the message comes from the Law (Exodus), the Major Prophets (Isaiah) and the Minor Prophets (Malachi).

Isaiah gave a message about God coming to his people. "In the desert prepare the way of the Lord." And later, "here is your God." That is what Mark quotes about Jesus coming to the people – another claim of the divinity of Christ.

Similarly, the Exodus verse is about the angel whom God will send ahead of the people through the wilderness to guide them. An angel of whom he says, "my name is in him."¹

The way is all important in this passage. The messenger is to prepare straight paths for the Lord. The fulfilment is found in John the Baptist calling the people back to God. John dressed in the classic outfit of a prophet – camel hair with a leather belt – just as Elijah had.² He was seen as a prophet in the manner of Elijah. Like Elijah he challenged corrupt rulers. Like Elijah he called the people back to the true worship of Yahweh. In his ministry he prepared people to hear and receive the one who would follow him – he made the path straight.

Advent is not about preparing for Christmas – it is preparing to obey Jesus. It is preparing to recognise God among us. It is preparing to follow Jesus on His Way.

As we think more about this, we realise that besides John preparing a way in people's hearts for Jesus, actually Jesus is the one who prepares a way for his disciples.

If we think through the gospel accounts, we find that when the disciples try to lead, they get in the way, they go the wrong way, or they make no headway. No Jesus has to lead them in the Way.

Mark 10:32 They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.

Mark 14:28 "... after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

Mark 16:7 "... tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.' "

When the disciples are sent ahead of Jesus, they got stuck. Remember, in Mark 6 after feeding the 5000, Jesus sent his disciples across the lake ahead of him. They laboured against a headwind for hours and were making little progress in the middle of the lake. Jesus walked out to them. As soon as he got in the boat, the wind died down and immediately they were at the other side.

Well he did say, "Without me you can do nothing!" Even in their own speciality of small boats, they need his presence.

It's true for us as well. We can so easily get bogged down – even in the things we are skilled at. Somehow, they don't go right. When we remember to pray and invite him into the task, things change.

Do you ask for help when you face difficulties, when you lose something, when you are stuck. He wants to be involved in our days. But also in the bigger things – we need to be quick to ask for his involvement his leading, his direction – else we can so easily labour for hours 'rowing against the wind.'

Each of us needs to make a way for him in our heart, will and live. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make the rough places smooth and bring down the high places. But then each of us needs to allow him to lead us in the Way.

Jesus remember said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me."³

Soon after we were in this building, we had our Parish prayer meeting Top Priority. We prayed about what the Lord wanted us to be doing as a Church.

¹ Exodus 23:21

² 2 Kings 1:8

³ John 14:6

My conversation with him went:

Me: Lord, what do you want us to be doing?

You already know.

Me: I'm sorry but I don't know what it is that I know.

Jon Henderson had the text, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

As we shared our impressions, I suddenly realised that our two portions together mirrored the conversation in John 14.

Jesus: You know the way to the place I am going.

Thomas: Lord, we don't where you are going so how can we know the way?

Jesus: I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.

On top of that, Lynelle, had the impression that we should sail to the horizon.

That is what we have tried to do. Rather than make great plans for developments, I have tried to stay close to Jesus and follow him. When we can see where to go, we sail to the limit of our vision and of course there the horizon is further away again.

I praise the Lord for the things he has lead us into these two years since then. Some rest, some training, some increase in missions involvement (Tonga and Kondo), some recent considerable increases in both staff and the new shop operation. We need to build on the new possibilities for children's work and the work of the Op Shop both in terms of business and outreach. It is an exciting time as we are lead into new adventures.

Second Coming

The other side of Advent is looking forward to the second coming of Christ. There are many passages in both the Old and New Testaments which refer to 'that Day.'

Today's reading from 2 Peter, tells of destruction and recreation as part of the events of that great Day. Peter is in the midst of an response to those who say it will never happen and everything will stay as is always has been.

Earlier in the chapter, he said there has already been a previous world judgment in the form of the Flood. The next one he tells us will be fire rather than water. If the delay is long it is only because of God's mercy. He wants as many as possible to be saved. God's experience of time is different from ours. Saying "a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day,"⁴ is taken by some to mean that a day of the Lord's time is a thousand years of ours. I think logically since it is turned both ways around, it is a way of saying God is outside time. If time is the fourth dimension, God is outside that dimension in eternity. He is not slow he is deliberate.

What Peter tells us about the Day of the Lord is that it will come unexpectedly as a thief would. It will be a catastrophic destruction involving fire. It seems pointless to try to predict too much from the description. The language is not going to be precise. Nonetheless, it conveys a fearsome finality. It is the end of this earth and the heavens – which seems to imply at least the atmosphere and space (presumably not the abode of God). They will be replaced by new heavens and a new earth.

Peter tells us to look forward to that prospect of the new heaven and the new earth. Through the process of resurrection the redeemer will be safely conveyed there.

The important matter for us now is how should we live?

How should we live?

The answer is we ought to live holy and godly lives⁵. We have been redeemed from judgment and destruction. We need to be living in harmony with our redeemer.

⁴ 2 Peter 3:8

⁵ 2 Peter 3:11

The new earth is described as the home of righteousness. So its inhabitants are to be righteous. We need to be spotless, blameless and at peace with him.⁶

That brings us back to the Way. Jesus is the Way – the Way to the Father. He is the means by whom we are made righteous. It is as we walk in him, that we are declared righteous and kept in righteousness. As we walk in the Way, we are at peace with him. We don't need to be afraid of the Day of the Lord. Judgment is already answered because Christ has died in our place. Therefore, in Him we can, as Peter writes, look forward to that Day when we shall enjoy the new heaven and the new earth.

I spoke earlier of needing to depend on him in practical matters. "Without me you can do nothing." How much more in moral and spiritual matters. Let us depend on him for to help us live rightly. We easily trip up. But, we can call out to him to help us, to lift us up again, to show us the way when we are unsure.

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⁶ 2 Peter 3:14