



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

Roadworks and Rulership

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

10th December 2017

© 2017 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

Advent

Last week, we entered the new Church year with the season of Advent.

You will remember the word, “Advent,” means coming. It is the season when we focus on the first and second comings of Christ. We look back to recall the first coming of Jesus and we look forward to the second coming when he has promised to return in power and judgement and to raise the dead to life in the general resurrection.

As we look back to the first coming it is easy to assume we are considering the birth at Bethlehem, but actually the focus is not so much the infant Jesus as the adult Jesus as he enters public ministry.

I decided to analyse the structure of the Lectionary readings over the three year cycle to clarify the emphasis we are given in those choices.

Each year we start with Jesus’ teaching on the End Times: what will be the signs of the end and his warning to keep watch. The four weeks of Epistle readings are encouragements that as we are faithful and trust Jesus, he will keep us safe to the end.

In the second & third weeks, the focus turns to John the Baptist because he was the forerunner and herald of the public ministry of Jesus.

Meanwhile the Old Testament readings are prophecies of the last judgement and prophecies of the coming Messiah.

Finally, on the fourth Sunday of Advent the attention turns to the birth of Jesus, with readings about the annunciation of the birth and at least hints of who he is: fully God and fully man.

So here we are in the second week with three readings: an Old Testament prophecy of one who would announce the coming of the Messiah; Mark account of John the Baptist preaching repentance to the Jewish people and years later the Apostle Peter explaining something of the prophesied end of the world and God’s patience with mankind.

John the Baptist’s Message

I want to focus on John the Baptist’s message and how it still resonates for us in Advent 2017.

As we read Mark’s opening to his gospel, we find that for him the important thing is that Jesus came with a message. It did not matter how or where he was born. All through his gospel, Mark uses the word,

'straightaway.' He is a man of the immediate. For him, the immediate thing is Jesus coming onto the public stage. This is announced by John who prepares the people to listen to Jesus.

John wore the standard prophet's outfit just as Elijah had done – a garment of camelhair with a leather belt. He lived simply – poorly - from what he could gather in the wilderness: locusts and wild honey. His message was to call the people to repent and prepare for the one who would follow him. He said they should turn from their sins, from their disobedience against God.

There are two main areas to consider: **Roadworks** and **Rulership**

Roadworks

He uses the picture language from Isaiah's prophecy of straightening a road for the coming of the expected one. Mark refers to Isaiah's words by mentioning only the straightening of roads. But Isaiah said more:

"In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."¹

It makes a big difference to travel to have good roads. I think of the road past Kondoa which is the main Cairo to the Cape highway. On our past visits it has been an unsealed road such as we would expect in the back country of Northland without the road metal chips and not too much attention from a grader!

However, now Peter Akester tells me that now it is sealed all the way from Kondoa to Dodoma and that reduces the travel time from 4 hours to 2½! Former Missionary Iri Mato was worshipping with us two weeks ago and he couldn't get over the idea of Kondoa to Dodoma in 2 ½ hours. He kept shaking his head in bewilderment at the idea having made many Landrover trips back and forth over that road. It means one can get to town and back in a day with time to do some business. It also means one is not so tired from the journey – there are great benefits.

We might think about the route from Silverdale to Puhoi as it was and as it is now. The new motorway with its tunnels has straightened the road. Think about going around the coast and down the hill to Waiwera with all the twists and turns. The road has a level or easy gradient. Hills have been lowered and valleys filled in to make a level path. Where necessary the tunnels allow us to travel through the hills with less effort and maintaining an easy pace.

John called people of his day to these radical changes and to demonstrate it by a ceremonial washing in the river followed by changed lives.

It is easy for us to be lulled into thinking our lives are just fine but often they are not.

- If the King of kings wants to come through your life, what is twisted or distorted?
- What needs to be straightened so the way is not tortuous?
- What is like a high hill: proud and resistant? Does that need to be levelled, brought low, humbled?
- Does anything need to be laid down because you are resisting the Lord in that area?
- Are there low places which are a problem? Maybe false humility, or a low esteem which prevents you acting as he would have you do?
- Are there rough places in your life which make transit difficult and slow? We all see people who are hindered because of the effects of past offences or wounds. Some places are 'no-go' areas. Some habits, beliefs or emotional pains make progress in life impossible to some while the same is easy for others.
- Could you ask: "What road works need to be done in my life, Lord?"

What might we do about this?

- Some things simply need recognition so we can change.
- Some change with prayer as we ask God to heal or change us.

¹ Isaiah 40:3-4

- Some things are active wrong-doing and we need to repent.
- With some things we need help possible because we don't recognise causes or know what to do with them. Ann, Helen and I are all happy to help with praying through such things if you want to address them.

Rulership

The second area is Rulership. John said the person coming after him was he said far greater than he. He was more powerful and John esteemed him greatly. In first century times, the roads were not clean, there would be animal dung to say the least. It was hot and feet get sweaty and smelly. It was the task of the lowest servant to take off the sandals of those coming into the house and wash their feet. John says the one he announces is so highly esteemed that he is not worthy even to perform the task of the lowest servant for him. Now John was the son of Zechariah, a Jewish priest. He was not of a lowly family – he had some family status. So this person before whom he say himself as unworthy was someone very special indeed! This would make people think in terms of high king or emperor. But knowing how John spoke about King Herod one might conclude it had to be someone even greater.

In the gospel of John, chapter 3, we hear another way John the Baptist spoke about Jesus. That Jesus is the bridegroom and he, John the Baptist, is the bridegroom's friend or we would say the best man. He has a role to perform to assist in the wedding of the groom and the bride. This is yet another reference to God as husband of his people - the church.

Did John at that time know that the one he was announcing was the Divine messiah?

If we look again at Isaiah's prophecy which John was fulfilling we find it goes on to say:

⁹ You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ²

John was the one who is bringing good tidings or gospel to Jerusalem. He was instructed to speak out loudly and announce, "Here is your God!" That is stunning. He is to say, "See the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him."

No wonder John said he was not worthy to untie the sandals of the one who followed him.

Then we are told something of the nature of the coming one who is God in verse 11: "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." Do you hear the gentleness and grace in those words? This is the first coming of Jesus. He came in gentleness. John the apostle wrote that he was "full of grace and truth."³

Think for a moment: Jesus rose from the grave. He has given those of us who put our trust in him his Spirit. He is with us now. He is the same yesterday, today and forever - he is still full of grace and truth.⁴

Hear those words again:

- He gathers his lambs in his arms - Do you feel in need of being lifted up?
- He carries them close to his heart – Dare you believe that Jesus would hold you close to his heart?
- He gently leads those who have young – he knows the demands on you, the cares, the responsibilities - maybe the little ones for whom you care – and he gently leads you.

What did Jesus accomplish on the cross? He took our sins upon himself and paid the penalty for them in our place. It was there and it has only been there that justice and mercy were both satisfied – both perfectly

² Isaiah 40:9-10

³ John 1:14

⁴ Heb 13:8

expressed. There was true justice as the sins of humanity were paid for. There was true mercy and God in Christ made it possible for us to be forgiven. Psalm 85 is set for today, from which we read:

² You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins. ... ¹⁰ Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. ¹¹ Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. ⁵

John announced this One who came to work this wondrous accomplishment. On the cross, love and faithfulness met; righteousness and peace kissed.

Have you heard John's proclamation of the Messiah, the Bridegroom, the gentle Shepherd, the Sovereign Lord? Have you responded? It is not enough to know about the call, the offer, the salvation. We must ask for it. We must come in repentance. We must ask him to save us and forgive us and rule us.

As you come to the communion rail, perhaps you might want to make it a time to deal with roadworks in your life or rulership issues. You could bring the rough places, the high places, the low places in your life to ask him to change you and heal you. You could ask him to save you and offer your life in obedience to him.

May faithfulness spring forth from the earth, and righteousness look down from heaven. Amen.

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

⁵ Psalm 85:2,10-11