

Sermon - St Edmund's 5th December 2021 - Second Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

“Prepare the Way of the Lord” what do you think of when you hear that phrase? It appears in the Gospel reading today, which you would expect as it's the second Sunday of Advent, yes, already! This phrase is at the start of a song in the musical “Godspell” - yes, I know that ages me. It probably reflects my interest in popular music. Now, for some one like Peter, it probably means some elegant classical piece of church music, with a complicated arrangement of the phrase. And that sums up our relationship - I have Spotify and make playlists of dubious modern music, Peter downloads hymns for Zoom services. I usually score higher on Radio 2's Popmaster than he does, but that is probably evidence of a misspent youth.

I think that at this time of year especially music can be very powerful - bringing back memories, making us think of childhood, family traditions and much more. Perhaps you hate the playing of Christmas tunes on the radio or even shops from before December begins, but such music is played because there is a feel good element. Whether it is Slade's Merry Christmas Everybody or a sacred carol, or even children singing Away in a Manger, a piece of music can make us think of Christmas. Of course there is the Carol Service from Kings College Cambridge (comment) which is the classic background to many people's Christmas Eve. People would queue for hours to attend the service, but a few days later the choir would sing something very similar, and very few people were interested. It appears it's all about the timing, the event, as well as the music.

I think it is true that music can speak to us like nothing else can, it is a special way of communication. I am a great fan of vocal music of most types, though I only know the greatest hits from operas. Peter likes instrumental music as well, but that's because he played in orchestras and went to concerts from childhood. My daughter in law Sarah

appreciated my party playlist a few weeks ago - high praise indeed. We bonded over the classic "Son of a Preacher Man" which has special meaning! Music is known to help with mental health issues, and even physical exercises are much better done to music. I think that we would all agree that an important element of Christmas is music of so many types and kinds.

Another thing that emerges from today's readings is the call to be willing to be still and alert to what God will do, perhaps through the most unlikely people in the most unlikely places. After all, it was understood that kings and rulers are born in palaces, with great fanfare and ceremony at this time. So although the three gospels give us chapter and verse about the birth of Jesus, a story that most of us know, it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we accept that he was born to a poor couple, a young woman, in a shed, stable or cave. God acts in ways nobody expects, both then and now.

I read a book, shocking I know, which speaks of the vital importance of "alertness" and "attention" in waiting for God, being on watch for what God will do. Being watchful for what God will do in our lives, for what he will do in the lives of others. It's not always straightforward, after all. God may cause a meeting, an encounter, that will change someone's life for the better. What we say and do to and for others can make all the difference, even if we don't think we are doing much. That can make life exciting, being watchful to be encouraging, helpful, and positive.

As churches it can be difficult to watch and wait for what God wants. We want to make decisions, make a difference, do it now. And sometimes timely action is what is needed, or nothing will get achieved. But on this second Sunday in Advent we are told to watch, to wait and prepare for God coming. Being alert to what God will do is hard, but must be done in the twenty-first century just as much as in the time Luke was writing about.

Luke in the third chapter of his Gospel gives us the time when John the Baptist came to prominence, when he demanded that people Prepare the Way of the Lord. He says it is a very physical thing - filling in valleys,

making every mountain and hill low, making the roads straight and the rough ways smooth. It sounds to me more like the plans for a highway, a road. Maybe like the Roman roads which still crisscross Britain, and probably other parts of the empire. It takes a lot of effort to make roads like that, people working together, coordinating efforts.

Peter would probably talk here about railways, embankments and cuttings, any way of running trains smoother and easier. Some of you may well visualise the instructions quoted by John like that. I visualize a way of driving Morgan, my trusty powerchair, over a smooth and level surface, with no rough surfaces, awkward steps or nasty corners. A smooth path, allowing travel, movement, and an easy route. John wasn't actually setting out plans for roads or rails, or even accessibility. He was talking about making it easy for God to arrive in our lives, or now our churches.

The other day I was appalled to read of how a group of people stood in the way of a lifeboat in Hastings as they tried to go out on a rescue. They didn't want the crew to rescue people from the Channel, to bring them into Britain. They were yelling that there were already too many people, that more refugees were not welcome. Suffice to say that the police were called. But what are people doing today when they act like that? Whatever the politics, whatever the attitudes to people coming to Britain as desperate people, trying to prevent their rescue is quite sickening. It's the opposite of what God wants us to do, to make ready for his purpose for the world.

So as we proceed through Advent, with all the challenges and fears for the future which the news can bring, with all the problems we may face, let us remember that God can be active in our world if we let him, if we are active in making it possible, making it ready. We may not be able to change the world by ourselves, or even the local area, but we can make ourselves ready, be alert and attentive to what God wants, today, tomorrow and forever. Amen.

Julie Barham