

In the opening verses of today's Gospel we are introduced to John the Baptist, a messenger sent by God, a man on a mission. His mission was to call people to prepare the way of the Lord, to recognise Christ and point him out to others, and to proclaim the good news of the gospel.

John's message is a message of hope and promise, but the message came to the crowds not in the comfortable places of their homes and families, it came to them in the wilderness. The wilderness can be a lonely, barren, desolate and at times a dangerous place.

There is nowhere to hide in the wilderness. There are no illusions or distractions. The wilderness strips us of all pretence and we are left to examine our hearts.

As we look back on 2022 it too could be described as a wilderness for many, a time of terrorism, war, failed economies, concerns over climate change, loneliness, isolation, difficulty, loss, anxiety, and uncertainty.

John's voice calls to us as it did to his first audience to prepare a way for the Lord, to make his paths straight in the wilderness of our world and our lives.

There are echoes here of the Advent themes of anticipation, waiting, hoping, and preparation. What might it mean for me, for us, to prepare the way for the coming one? John tells us that preparation involves repentance and confession.

I wonder how does the word repentance make you feel, guilty, unworthy, fearful? Repentance isn't so much about our feelings of guilt, fear, and unworthiness as it is about God's power to transform us into the image of Christ. It calls out to us to face up to who we truly are and in humility allow and invite God's presence into our pain and brokenness.

Repentance and confession call us to face the truth about ourselves and as a result change the direction of our lives.

It calls us to reorientate our hearts, minds, souls, and strength towards Christ the true source of peace, hope, joy, and love. John calls out to those on the banks of the Jordan and to us too to turn, return and receive the gift of forgiveness.

It doesn't always mean making a 180-degree turn though, it may be that only a small redirection onto the right path is needed. It involves a willingness to admit our mistakes and confess them to God. The wilderness is a place of repentance, confession and forgiveness, a place of self-discovery and transformation, a place where our hearts and lives are changed, it opens our hearts and our lives to the coming of Christ. John's message of repentance isn't necessarily just about looking back though, it also about looking forward. God is doing a new thing, and we have got to be ready.

John's mission also involved recognizing Christ and pointing him out to others. John was waiting in anticipation for Christ to appear and recognised who he was when he came to be baptised in the Jordan. Wherever we are and whatever we are doing let us wait expectantly and look for glimpses of Christ, even in the most barren and dry places of our lives. Our eyes have grown lazy, other things capture our attention, there is little time left for wonder and worship. We need to be looking for glimpses of God's glory breaking in.

He is Emmanuel, God with us, present, alongside us in the joys and sorrows of life. Into our impossible messes comes the messiah who makes the impossible possible. He is and always will be God with us. I must admit that there have been times, many times in my life, when I have not been aware of Christ's presence with me, times when I have been too busy to take time to look for him and notice him, times when I have been too caught up with the hustle and bustle of life.

As we open our eyes to the weaknesses that we see in ourselves and bring those weakness to God in confession and as we receive His forgiveness, so our eyes are opened to see Him to notice Him. To notice Him in the unexpected places. As we rejoice in him for all that He has done, as we slow down to name and then thank Him for all the blessings in our lives, He becomes more visible to us.

God isn't hiding from us, we just need to slow down and make space and time to search for Him, if we look, really look, we can find him in so many places., He can be seen in the kindness shown to us by a neighbour, He can be seen in the grandeur of the stars in the night sky and in the intricate detail and beauty of the tiny fingers of a new-born child, He can be seen in the pages of scripture, He can be seen everywhere, on the mountain tops and in the deepest darkest valley. We need only to slow down and open our eyes.

We like John are on a mission to proclaim the good news. To tell others the good news that 2000 years ago Christ came into the world and through His life, death and resurrection reconciled us to God. The good news that Christ is present with us now through his spirit and the good news that he will come again in glory. We can also proclaim the good news by telling our stories to one another of where we have seen and witnessed Christ at work in our lives and in the lives of others. We can share stories of how our faith has helped us, how it is changing us, how it is challenging us, shaping us, how our faith affects the decisions that we make and the way that we live our lives. How it impacts our work and family life.

During Advent rather than getting caught up in the hustle and bustle of preparing for Christmas, for the coming of the Christ child let us slow down and intentionally make time in our busyness listen to others, to really listen to their stories, stories of joy and laughter, stories of heartache and disappointment, stories of wrestling with God, stories of the goodness and faithfulness of God. And in the sharing of these stories the good news of the gospel is proclaimed, the good news that God is with us and that He is for us, that He is a good God full of mercy and compassion, a God of justice and of peace.

God is sending us into the world to be his agents of hope, peace, joy and love to those in need, and to proclaim the Good news through our actions as well as our words. By reaching out in love and compassion to those in need, by speaking up for those who have no voice of their own and transforming unjust structures of society, by caring for creation, we proclaim the Good news.

And so, wherever and whoever we are, our mission, should we choose to accept, it is to share the love and light, joy, hope and peace of Christ with those we meet. This Advent let us join with John in preparing a way for the Lord, in looking with expectation for Him and in proclaiming the Good news of the Gospel. Amen.

