

**Readings:**

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

**Be prepared!**

Only two weeks to go! How did that happen? Christmas seems to have caught us unawares this year and no sooner have we got into the season of Advent, it's almost over and Christmas is upon us.

I wonder if you've got lots of guests coming over Christmas – and if so, are you prepared for any surprises? What if your sister, who you don't see much of, announces that she will be bringing her new partner. That's fine you say, always room for one more. But it's not till they arrive just in time for the roast turkey and all the trimmings, that you discover he's a strict vegan and you've got absolutely nothing in the house that he could eat.

The season of Advent gives us a chance to prepare for the coming of God to the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. But why do we need to prepare? We know that Jesus was born at Christmas. We've known that since we were children – Christmas is about Jesus being born and that is what we celebrate. We don't need to get ready. It's the same old same old.

Except it's not. Each year is different – life has moved on and we might be in a very different place from where we were last Christmas. If we're not careful we can miss the significance of Christmas in the midst of all the shopping and wrapping and eating. It's about far more than a baby being born, even if it is a baby called Jesus. If we don't prepare ourselves we'll miss the point of who it is who comes among us and what that means for us and for the whole world. We need to understand who this baby really is and what it means for our God to become a human person and come to live amongst his people.

Our gospel reading, the first eight verses of Mark's gospel, gives us some important clues about why we need to prepare. John the Baptist was calling the Jewish people to renew their relationship with God. His message was that someone was coming – someone greater than him who would baptise them with the Holy Spirit. On its own that may not mean much to us, but it obviously struck a chord with the people who heard the message, and we are told they came in droves to be baptised – to wash away their sins and make a new start with God.

With the twenty-twenty vision of hindsight we know who was coming and what it all led to, but at that time no one knew who Jesus was – not even, apparently, John the Baptist, who was after all, his cousin. What they did know was that the prophets of old had spoken about the one who was to come, sent by God, and whose coming would signify that the end was near, the end being the promised Day of the Lord when God would come to judge the world and put to right all wrongs and injustices. Those ideas developed over a long period of history and the idea that God would bring to an end the injustices of the present age became particularly pertinent in the two hundred years before Jesus was born when the Jews were subjected to an extended period of brutal oppression. The idea that God would punish the oppressors gave some comfort to those who were suffering.

There are several passages in Isaiah's prophecies where he describes the Servant figure who will come from God to bring new life, healing, all the things we associate with the Kingdom of God, that we see

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fulfilled in Jesus.<sup>1</sup> When Isaiah wrote he didn't have a specific person in mind, he had no idea when all this would happen. According to the Jewish faith it has still to happen, although we as Christians see Jesus as the fulfilment of these words. And it is clear that Jesus himself saw the prophecies of Isaiah as the mandate for his work – remember how he told the synagogue congregation in Nazareth that the passage from Isaiah 61 that he read out to them was fulfilled in him.<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah was writing towards the end of the period known as the Exile, when many of the Jews were living in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC. Eventually the Babylonian empire gave way to the Persians who were more favourable towards the Jewish people allowing them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple and resume an independent life.

The passage from Isaiah we heard today is an encouragement to the Jews in Babylon to get ready for the journey back to Jerusalem. It would take some courage on their part – during the years of exile many had died, some had lost their faith as it had appeared that God had deserted them. Others had settled in Babylon and were content to remain there. But Isaiah says that God is calling them to come back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, and renew their faith in him as God's people. He is still their God and as the Creator of all things he has power and ultimate authority over all worldly powers, so they can trust him that what he says will happen.

The idea that God was sending someone described by Isaiah as a servant developed into the idea that a mighty warrior figure would come who would rescue the people from foreign occupation and religious oppression. They had forgotten that when Isaiah wrote the verses we read today, about 500 or 600 years before Jesus was born, the idea of kingship was much more as a shepherd than as a warrior. In verse 10 Isaiah says that God will come with might and power, but in verse 11: 'He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.'

Mark uses the words from Isaiah 40 to underscore the importance of the coming of John the Baptist as the one whose job was to get the people ready for the coming of Jesus. John is the messenger sent by God to tell the people to prepare. In Luke's gospel (Luke 2: 67-79) John's father Zechariah had prophesied that John would be the one to prepare the people (verses 76-79) – this was not something John had dreamt up on his own – this was God's calling for him – to announce the coming of the Messiah.

Why did the people need to prepare? Because the coming of the Messiah meant the beginning of a new age – the time when God would come as judge as well as King. He would judge the world and put right all that was wrong, and if people wanted to be part of the new Kingdom, they had to be right with God. So that meant repenting of sin, as John was calling them to do, and as a mark of this repentance to be baptised – washed clean. In our church, baptism still has this element of being washed clean and beginning a new life.

As the Jews of the time understood it, repenting – turning back to God and being cleansed from sin was all the preparation they needed to do to be ready for the coming of the Messiah. But Mark is writing his gospel from a post-Resurrection perspective. He knows that Jesus was more than the Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 42: 1-4; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-11; 52:13-53:12

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:16-21

understanding of the Messiah and that his coming was more significant than even the prophets had believed.

The Messiah in Jewish thought was not divine. He would become God's Son by adoption but was a human being through and through. According to Christian belief, Jesus is God's Son eternally, as one of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus is God in human form; so he is both divine and human. This is the core of our belief and it's something we can't explain but we worship as the mystery of God's word become flesh, as John puts it in the introduction to his Gospel (John 1:14).

Mark's gospel is sometimes seen as less complex, easier to understand than for example, that of John, with its signs and "I am" sayings. But although much shorter and more compact, Mark packs a lot of meaning into his fewer words. We see that right from the first word – *arche* – translated as beginning. As in John's gospel we are taken back to the very beginning – the beginning of creation. Mark is here underlining the nature of the one who is to come – he is the eternal Son of God. Then he speaks of the *euaggelion* – the good news. This word was a technical term for the coming to power of a new king. The coming one is a King, and in Paul's letter to the Colossians we are told he is the one through whom, for whom, and by whom all things were made. That is who is coming. Not a warrior figure who will liberate the people from Roman occupation, but the one who will make all things right and usher in the new age of God's kingdom, the one who has the power of the Creator of all things.

So this is very radical and very subversive. To be a Christian at that time meant acknowledging God as the ultimate power in your life, not the Roman emperor. That could be a dangerous thing to believe. When worship of the Roman emperor as god was mandatory to refuse to do so could mean death, or at the least punishment. It meant that life was lived in the midst of a power struggle – who was the ultimate power in your life – King Jesus or Emperor Nero? The whole of Mark's gospel is about the struggle for power between the world and evil, and the power of good brought by Jesus – the struggle that culminated in the cross and the victory of the resurrection. The struggle begins as soon as Jesus has been baptised. Although he has heard his Father's voice confirming that he is God's son, the beloved, and has been given the power of the Holy Spirit to enable his ministry, he is driven out into the wilderness to think about what that will mean, and to be tested by Satan. Battle had commenced!

But why do we need to prepare? After all, this all happened two thousand years ago – it's nothing new.

The Bible tells the story of God with his people. As Christians, despite the time gap, we are part of that story. God is with us just as much as he was with the Jewish people and then with the Apostles and the early church. We are the ones who carry on with the story and take it on to the next chapter – we and all who follow Christ today.

We prepare for the coming of Christ at Christmas because we remember with thankfulness that in Jesus our God has come among us to share our life and bring us into a loving relationship with him. In becoming one of us Jesus entered into the realm of evil so that he could overcome it. And as God, he was able to make it possible for us to share in the abundant life that is not ended by our physical death. So we give thanks for his coming, born in humility and poverty despite being the creator of all things. But we also have his promise that he will return – we don't know when and we don't quite understand what that all means, but we believe and trust that as he has promised, so it will be. And for that we have to be ready – so we should always be prepared because we don't know when the end will be – as Peter said in our second reading – God's timing is something for God to know, not us.

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And a further reason for being prepared – perhaps the most important. Jesus told us to abide in him and he will abide in us. We are called to be fit to be God's home. God wants to abide in each of us – to make his home in each of us. He helps us in that – we are not left on our own to make ourselves to be fit to be God's home – we have the Holy Spirit to help us. But we have to do at least some of the preparation. We have to get rid of the things in our lives that stop us giving a home to God – our dependence on material possessions, our selfishness – all those things that are the antithesis of the selfless love and service we see in Jesus. All that takes quite a lot of preparation. We also need to spend time in prayer and study so that we get to know Jesus better – as friend and companion on the way as well as our saviour. To really know him as he is shown in the gospels and not just as the baby born in Bethlehem, so that we can make him known to others.

All that takes quite a bit of preparation, and if we're honest, Advent may not be long enough! And if you'd known a bit more about the person coming to Christmas lunch, maybe you would have prepared a bit more carefully.

To God be the glory. Amen.

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