

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^[d]
 who will prepare your way;
³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight,’”

Times and places matter. Settings matter. Culture and contexts matter. Last year hearing these words “Prepare the way of the Lord” you might have imagined yourself sitting in the Opera House: Handel’s *Messiah* is beginning. This year you may have thought these words are like a tweet: we hear so much about tweets these days: short and sweet, seldom long-lived like a new thread on facebook.

Some years ago my son, Andrew, gave me a book for Christmas called *Jesus on ThyFace: Social Networking for the Modern Messiah*. It imagines Jesus as a facebook user—a fanciful idea, it is true, but one which left me wondering this year, imagine John the Baptist on-line, posting, liking this, commenting on that, adding a repentance emoji alongside photos of recent baptisms.

And then, in the midst of the stream of assorted postings, cat videos and adverts , in the midst of all that chit-chat about birthdays, parties, family outings, resource-sharing—in the midst of this river, this cascade of words, some expressing deeply-felt moments of loss and grief—into all of this John the Baptist posts these words from the prophet Isaiah. “Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight”. Imagine that.

Times and places matter. Settings matter. Culture and contexts matter. Imagine this post on facebook—would it attract likes or not? Would a question mark or puzzled emoji appear? And, further afield, it is hard to imagine these words getting much of an airing on sports radio! They’re not likely to be mentioned by a shock jock or find a space in the international news coverage of SBS or ABC where the power-plays, the geopolitics of our day are covered. “Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight”.

Truth to tell these lines are not likely to trump the Christmas adverts which long for “something bigger than Christmas”—that is, a consumer shopping extravaganza designed to make up for all those lost shopping hours this year. O come, o come Emmanuel. Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight’. The great Advent hymn—even with fresh words that set before the warm embrace of wisdom, joy, peace and love— this great Advent hymn cannot compete with the carefully chosen background muzak to be found in the shopping centres.

Its long, sonorous, expectant cadences do not match the spirit of Silent night, away in a manger, and that perennial favourite that can follow you around the supermarket aisles, “O come, all ye faithful”; nor does its seriousness of mood lend itself to upstaging the seasonal movie favourite of “All I want for Christmas is you ... and you ... and you”.

Times and places matter. Settings matter. Cultures and contexts matter. Our contemporary world thrives on sound-bytes, short attention spells, words that are ephemeral—that is, short-lived, of the moment. Our contemporary world is built around statistics and numbers, codes—bar codes, QR codes. It relies on reports and plans—all rather removed from a prophetic oracle (as it is called) like this one from so long ago. It is almost as if it belongs to another language; it sits inside what philosophers might call another language game in which it makes immediate sense.

Our words last for a breath, a day, a little longer and they are gone. These words have not. They are long lasting. They will outlive us. Here in Mark’s gospel they come to us through the voice of John the Baptist: they have begun this gospel for nearly 2000 years. But, truth to tell, they are much older than that. In our reading this morning they have been taken out of their original context:

how they found their way into John’s mouth would have surprised the author of second Isaiah—that is the portion of the book of Isaiah which begins at chapter 40 and runs through to the close of chapter 55. They are already 6 centuries or more old by the time they make their way into our gospels: it would be like us turning to the 14th century for words of wisdom, for words of comfort, coming then as they

would have done from the time of one of the great plagues, the Black Death, when the church—by and large failed to meet the challenge of their times.

These words to do with a voice crying in the wilderness and preparing the way for the one who is to come—they do not stand in glorious isolation. They belong to their own time, their own context, they are written in Hebrew and then a form of Greek long before they made their way into our languages. The people of Israel are in exile: they have been carried away by a greater power to Babylon. They have no idea for how long; they no longer live as they once lived. Into this setting, this context, comes these words: the exiles are about to go home; they are about to return to Zion; they will rebuild their Temple, their place of worship. They will be set free by Cyrus, the king of Persia: for them he was the one who is to come.

Those words we have from Isaiah this morning are part of a much larger oracle. It begins with equally familiar words:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
 says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
 and cry to her
 that she has served her term,
 that her penalty is paid,

It leads on to comment upon the brevity of our generations—and then declares that the Word of our God will endure forever. These words of comfort—the original meaning of the word is “to strengthen”—these words of comfort pave the way for a series of four servant songs where the one who is to come is not about to go on holiday, not about to go shopping or partying.

These servant songs proclaim good news to islands and continents and the servant will

not shout or cry out,
 or raise his voice in the streets.
³ A bruised reed he will not break,

and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.
 In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged
 till he establishes justice on earth.
 In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

The songs will end with the suffering servant to be found towards the end of second Isaiah.

Who has believed our message
 and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
² He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
 and like a root out of dry ground.
 He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
 nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
³ He was despised and rejected by mankind,
 a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
 Like one from whom people hide their faces
 he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

The servant spoken of in Isaiah seems to anticipate the life, ministry and death of the one whose Advent we now wait upon. Truth to tell, Advent is an unusual time: its message is to prepare for Christmas, for the birth of the Christ child in a manger. It is rather odd in that sense because, of course, Jesus was born nearly 2000 years ago and how, on earth, can you make yourself ready for a birth that has already happened? To use Isaiah's words how can we prepare the way for a past event?

Our words come and go; they are for a time; they can heal, wound, encourage, criticize, embarrass, inspire, affirm. Our words are important but they do not last like this saying from Isaiah whereby John prepares for the advent of the Christ who is to come.

Advent is not just about this first coming of Christ, his birth, though. We might say that the Christian faith exists in three time zones: the first is the life and times of Jesus himself, his first appearance. The third lies in the future. The Christian faith looks to sometime in the future and the return of Christ: we know not know the hour. We live, we dwell in this interval, this period between the first and second coming of Christ, the first and second Advent. When we sing ‘O come, o come, Emmanuel’ we do so mindful of how human history will eventually come to a close—and generation after generation, in the meantime, awaits that fulfilment and seeks to live life in our here and now in a way that responds to the call of Christ upon our lives. Our lives in Christ are not bound by the present moment.

It is into this setting, our setting, our context that these words of Isaiah come. At the close of 2020, at the dawn of a new Christian year, a year that has been so strange, so demanding in so many ways, is it not good to look back to Isaiah and hear those words of Comfort, comfort my people? Let the people be strengthened in their faith, let them be strengthened in their hope in God.

Is it not good to make ready, to prepare the way for the return of the one to whom John bears witness—this Christ whom we seek to follow, to imitate: though he is still yet to come again, in his life and his teaching, in his ministry of healing he showed to us the human face of God and what is expected of us.

Those words from Isaiah prepared the way for the people of Israel to return to their places of worship; those words from Isaiah led John to prepare the way for Christ and the birth of the Christian faith; those words from Isaiah invite us to return to our places of worship, to our church and to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to a world that is being buffeted about by far too much this year.

Amen.

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