



THE NEW SHOFAR

A happy Christmas requires a faithful Advent preparation

Isaiah 40:1-11 - Luke 3:1-6

ADVENT 2

Prepare a way for the Lord...

...And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed

The way Luke has used this text from Isaiah illustrates the joy of repentance. This voice is crying in the wilderness, calling upon the people to do the hard yards of repentance. It is not going to be easy to prepare for the arrival of God in their midst. And this very much is a road to bring God into their lives...*a highway for our God*. It is not their road to God, but a preparing of God's road to them.

However, the whole of their lives' landscapes need to be transformed. Valleys have to be filled in and mountains and hills *laid low*. This is just to have God a part of their lives. Surely the first thing they needed to decide was: is all of this effort worth it? Will having God as the foundation of our lives make that much of a difference? It is surely a great Advent question.

Then comes the hard work. They were used to the old "landscape", had learned to live around the challenges associated with hills, valleys and mountains in the various aspects of their lives. Not as good as flat ground and yet we still manage to keep going. Do we really need that much of a life transformation?

The prophet makes it clear. If we want God to shepherd us; if we desire to live in the shelter and peace that is a part of being *gathered into God's arms* and if we want to be fed by God there is only one way...*repent - shub*

But note the promise. It is in the process of preparing the way God's glory, power, love, might and mercy is being revealed to us.

Repent! *Shub!* Life transformation

When John talks of "repenting" and uses a quotation from Isaiah he has in mind the prophet's understanding of that call. The Hebrew word for "repent" is *shub* and it comes with a rich background. Isaiah is talking about the end to the Jewish exile in Babylon, a return home to the land of the covenant and a time of peace and prosperity. For him, however, there is no point in going back to Israel and living the same kind of life they had before. Something had to change.

Shub means to turn around and take life off in a new direction, a direction that will lead to a transformation of life. It will include being sorry for past sins and failings, even a confession or an acknowledgement of sins but they are only steps enabling the life change required by God.

The text from Isaiah highlights this meaning... *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*. Instead of trying to run life without God at their centre; instead of seeking to feed themselves with the things they think lead to peace, joy, hope and happiness, they are to *shub*, turn from ways that lead them back into the darkness of "exile" and instead live according to the will of God, let God be their peace. They were to strive to be humble before God.

This is what the Baptist is demanding of his people. Simply saying sorry is not going to be enough. There needs to be some fundamental shake up in their lives, in their relationships to God and to each other and a reassessment of their priorities.

Advent shub: This is a wonderful insight into the call of Advent. We know the Lord will return as judge and we are to ponder: *Just how prepared are we?* Remember, as a faith community (parish) we will be assessed on how well we have taken the Gospel out into our world as well as on our own personal faith living.

In the wilderness the word of God came to John

The wilderness was a lot of things for the Jews. It was the place of wild animals, a dangerous place where it was easy to become lost, be killed or robbed or even more threateningly, run into demons or evil spirits. But it was also a place for testing, for trying one's vocation, just as God had tested Israel in the wilderness for forty years before they could enter the Promised Land. It is the perfect place for a prophet of God. To hear the prophet and benefit his his preaching the people needed to leave the comforts of Jerusalem and their home villages and make their way down into the inhospitable desert – with all of the risks associated with that journey. There was never an easy ride to righteousness. But is it worth the effort? It is vital to ask this question.

Clearly there were many people at the time who thought it was indeed worth the trip. The Jewish commentator Josephus notes the way John the Baptist told the people his baptism was a waste of time unless they had already cleansed their souls by a transformation of life. It was only when they were already living a righteously did his baptism assist them (*Antiquities 18; 116*)

Prepare a road for the Lord

The Hebrew text from Isaiah being quoted here keeps a focus on the wilderness. This is for a very good reason. It is the wilderness that stands between the people of Israel in exile in Babylon and their home in Jerusalem. To get home means transiting a massive desert, a dangerous wilderness. The Hebrew reads – *a voice cries – in the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord.*

The Babylonians were known for their highways and Babylon itself was built around the conjunction of two highways – the highway of the gods and the highway of the king. It was a symbol of the power of Babylon, the place on earth where heaven and earth connect. Then along comes Isaiah and urges them to *make a highway for Yahweh* in the wilderness. This is not a highway for Israel to cross the desert. It is a pathway for their God. Unlike the Babylonian gods, Yahweh the God of Israel did not need a highway in order to make his glory manifest. Nothing the Jewish people could construct would manage that. What then is this “highway”?

What God will do there in the wilderness is reveal his glory in his divine actions, in the leading of Israel home to the promised land. God is revealed through what he does, what he continues to do in human history. God is not known through monuments, the works of human hands. God is experienced in daily life. It will be in their returning home that the people and the nations will understand the glory of God. What *the nations* thought was a vanquished God of a vanquished people is now fulfilling promises that had been made. God is bringing his children home.

The key words of Advent 2

What holds both of these readings together is this fundamental concept of **shub**. Whether it is Israel of the Bible or parishioners in Australia in 2018/19, what God demands and expects is an ongoing attention to his call to **shub**. Any Christian who remains content with life as it is, with the spiritual existence we have at this particular moment in our lives and does not seek a life transformation, a spiritual renewal, a renewed spiritual and ecclesiastical direction in life is a Christian who is not listening to the voice of God in the Scriptures. We are the ones in the *wilderness* and the voice of God is crying out to us – *prepare a way for the Lord*. It is a call to all, to everyone and not just to those who are yet to know Christ. We are *to prepare a way for the Lord* in our lives today and then tomorrow, and then, for the rest of our lives, keep on with the vocation to *prepare a way for the Lord*. This is Advent's challenge: *How can we prepare?*