

Sermon on Sunday 5 December 2021

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Malachi 3. 1-4 & Luke 3. 1-6

Openhearted

'Every valley shall we lifted up and every mountain levelled. Roads will be straightened and rough places smoothed.'

Not the blueprint for Cross Rail, but words of ancient prophesy designed to instill hope in a rescuer God.

Throughout its oppressed history, Israel would again and again cling to this hope of deliverance. After 200 years of radio silence, however, crushed by a cruel occupation, their religion compromised, hope in first century Palestine was in particularly short supply.

Until... out of the wilderness, comes John, looking and sounding every bit the Old Testament prophet. And he's quoting again that ancient promise with its rally-call, 'Prepare the way for the Lord... because at last, at last he's coming and *all* people will see his salvation'.

And this promise awakes something long buried. People rally in their droves, line up in their thousands to wash away the past in

the waters of repentance; anything to speed their Saviour's return.

Fast forward two millennia and those words still call to us. The Lord has come, yes, but still, he comes to those who make ready a place for him. So, 'Prepare the way'.

But how do we prepare the way? What obstacles or roadblocks might obstruct God's progress? What levelling or felling must be done in our own lives to make clearances for his rule? From what, in John's language, must we 'repent'? In other words, what u-turns, what changes in direction do we need to make?

I guess that will be different for each of us. For most, however, it will involve removing distractions of some kind; those things we fill our time and our heads with which help avoid facing the truth about ourselves, or entering into any intimacy with God.

Often religion, of course, can be the biggest distraction. As Richard Rohr says, 'Religion is the safest place to hide from God'. If our religion strokes our ego or reassures us that we're right and others wrong. If it is our escape from reality or our veneer of respectability. If ritual becomes confused with worship or we hide behind the shalts and shalt nots, there's no way through for God. It's so much easier to be religious than to be transformed. And, of course, it's exactly that kind of religion that puts obstacles in the paths of others, that prevents them from seeing the salvation of their God.

True religion is openhearted, humble, vulnerable.

Another powerful distraction is busyness.

Poet priest John O'Donohue once said, 'We are caught on a treadmill of rapidity. We need to make clearances in our lives so that we can see the shape of our souls'.



Sometimes stopping is the most important part of any journey. Catching our breath, making clearances to see the shape our souls are in, to sit with the silence if possible, to realign ourselves with that flow of God. Let go, let be, let God consciously be welcomed.

Of course, for some of us there is no escaping busyness. We have responsibilities and we can't just step out of that. We can, however, consciously invite God into the busyness, welcome his energy into the flow of our own.

What are the things that particularly distract you? What obstacles might you consciously or unconsciously put in God's way?

As you're asking yourself that question, here are a few of suggestions from personal experience:

Self-sufficiency; I'm perfectly happy, thank you, relying on my own resources and energy.

Self-centeredness; living as if God or others aren't important.

Self-protection; closing down challenge in case it means I might have to change.

There's a theme here, isn't there?

What then might be an antidote to all this 'self'?

A few suggestions:

We displace self-sufficiency when we dare to release control; when we dare to trust that in God's strength we flourish, in our own, eventually we starve.

We override self-centeredness when we dare to be kinder, because kindness is a superpower. Kindness begets kindness. Little thoughtful acts, kind words release a power that can change someone's day and occasionally someone's life. And if we model a kinder religion, then others will see the kinder God and will experience something of the salvation of that God.

And self-protection we overcome by daring to be vulnerable, by daring to say, 'I'm not OK' or 'I don't know either'; by refusing to hide behind the usual masks.

Advent asks us to make clearances in our lives so we can see the shape of our soul in all its beauty and damage and hunger. Not as some self-help exercise in becoming a better version of ourselves, but in order that we might see differently. Because when we really see, when we see the salvation of our God; when we see ourselves and others as we are seen, then we and our world cannot remain the same.

John O'Donohue again:

'To enter into the gentleness of your own soul changes the tone and quality of your life. Your life is no longer consumed by hunger for the next event, experience or achievement. You learn to come down from the treadmill and walk on the earth. You gain a new respect for yourself and others and you learn to see how wonderfully precious this one life is. You begin to see through the enchanting veils of illusion that you had taken for reality. You no longer squander yourself on things and situations that deplete your essence. You know now that your true source is not outside you. Your soul is your true source and a new energy and passion awakens in you.'

So, today may that new energy and passion awaken within us. May kindness and vulnerability free us. May we be secure in that promise called hope and may our lives be highways for God that *all* may see the salvation of our God.