

EVENSONG 08.12.19

LBC

---

It's the second Sunday in Advent and we are well and truly into the season of preparation.

In the workplace many people have felt their workload or hours increase due to seasonal demands. In church we are busy planning, rehearsing, advertising, and preparing for the various Carol services, Eucharists, Christmas Tree Festivals and other December initiatives with which All Saints is involved. In our homes we're decorating, putting up trees, ordering food, baking, buying gifts, card writing, planning our social calendars and everything else in between. It's no wonder so many people refer to this as the 'silly season'!

What are we preparing for? Well, Christmas, of course. But with all the business going on it's easy to forget what this actually means – the birth of Jesus, the Christ, God made flesh, born to dwell amongst us, here on earth.

In our second reading this evening, John is absolutely clear in his testimony about what his purpose is.

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord", he says.

He is calling the people to prepare, to repent, to be baptised and to return to God. They must make straight the way of the Lord, whose arrival amongst them is imminent.

John is also absolutely clear that he himself is not the headlining act here. It's not about him. "I am not the Messiah", he tells the priests and Levites. "The one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of His sandal."

The example of John is one which we must pay particularly close attention to in our vocation as followers of Christ. Just as John baptised and told the people to prepare whilst reinforcing a very conscious lack of focus on himself, so we must live out our lives in loving service to God and His people in a way which clearly and unfailingly signposts them to Jesus Christ. It must never become about us.

So how can we signpost people to Christ, both within the context of the Advent season as well as within the context of our country and the world around us at present?

St. Francis of Assisi famously said "preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words". I think that the way we act and the example that we set is the best way that we as Christians can point people towards Jesus and reflect His light into our communities and the wider world.

We can do this through supporting initiatives such as Wycombe Homeless Connection, The One Can Trust Foodbank, The Wycombe Refugee Partnership and other organisations. As a church we can offer Debt Counselling, community meals, organise teams to visit the sick or lonely, offer support for young families, or clubs for older people or those living with disabilities or dementia.

We can also signpost Jesus as individuals in the way we live our lives and in the choices we make. In a time when we are experiencing a climate crisis, we can be better stewards of the earth by protecting habitats, reducing our carbon footprint, our emissions and our use of plastics. We can commit to buying ethical clothes, food and household items, ensuring wherever possible that we do not support unjust systems which damage our world or our brothers and sisters with whom we share it.

It's hard if not impossible to do all these things all the time – but we can all try that little bit harder and be mindful of these issues, and in our actions reflect God's light into our world just that little bit better.

As the general election looms, the one thing we can all do this week is to turn out and vote, and to aim to signpost Jesus through the choice we make. Paul Bayes, the Bishop of Liverpool and formerly Team Rector here in Wycombe, says this: "If you're a Christian, then after praying, reading and learning, cast your vote in a way that you believe will help the poorest most." Mahatma Gandhi famously said that "the true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members". This is the social gospel and one which it is incumbent on all Christians to follow. WE must be the voice crying out in the wilderness against injustice and oppression in all its forms.

Finally, we can reflect Jesus through being counter cultural. Not in a pious, worthy, 'holier than thou' way. Nothing drives me mad at this time of year more than Christians making judgemental comments about people who've put their decorations up too early, sung an inappropriate carol or eaten a mince pie too soon. Being the joy police will not help signpost people to Jesus!

But, we who are gathered here do know something of the mystery and wonder at keeping Advent, and we can reflect a little of this to those around us, perhaps by just slowing the pace a little, by inviting people to a church service, by supporting our local and national charities, by small acts of kindness to those in need, by resisting the commercialism and by being ethical in our purchasing.

And, by making time, even if only a little, for some personal prayer, reading or devotion, or whatever helps you to focus on God. In doing so we can make the season that little bit less 'silly', and the result we be that we reflect Jesus to those around us in ways which we can't foresee, but which will show them that God is at work in us and in the world around us.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.

May the Lord, when He comes, find us watching and waiting.

Amen.

