

## Prepare the Way of the Lord

The words of today's readings are familiar enough to many of us. The talk is of preparing the way for the Lord. Centuries before railways had been invented, Isaiah talks of hills being brought low and valleys being filled. Viaducts, cuttings and embankments are all part of the picture, as the people of Israel are invited to prepare the level road on which the Messiah of Israel will come. That imagery is then taken up by Mark to say something of the ministry of John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus to come.

Theologically, I have a problem with preparing the way for the Lord. Because what if you prepare this way, this road, this railway – what if you prepare the way for the Lord, and when he arrives, he chooses to go a different way? What if he chooses a different way? If you can prepare his way, and map out everything he's going to do, he's not going to be much of a Lord.

What is this all about? How is the Messiah's way prepared? According to the New Testament, it is by baptising people. What has that got to do with all the railway pictures?

Ned Flanders is the caricature of an evangelical christian on the Simpsons. And there is an episode where Mrs Flanders has been away for a few days, and she explains her whereabouts. "I was at Bible camp" she says, before adding, "I was learning how to be more judgemental." A brilliant piece of comedy. It's often enough that the bible is used to justify some of the most polite and self-deluded forms of judgementalism. But this week we have seen a senior police officer express this precise sentiment, without a hint of irony, self awareness of comedy.

It was on Panorama, where the chief constable of West Yorkshire Police, offered his closing comments on the action of a woman who had staged the kidnapping of her own daughter in an attempt to raise money for herself.

"This a woman who has lived her life without any personal responsibility. Without any sense of having to answer for any of her actions. She feels she should be pitied, that is the response that my officers interviewing her have been getting. " But then came the shocking part. "Actually we shouldn't pity we should judge more."

We shouldn't pity, we should judge more! It's kind of the opposite of Jesus. But is it the opposite of John the Baptist? When you read about John the Baptist, it looks as though he agrees with the police chief! His unrestrained judgementalism explodes into unsuspecting Israelites like a weapon of mass destruction.

How does John the Baptist think we are to prepare for the Day of the Lord? On the surface of it, it looks like judgement. But there is a different dynamic at work here. The kind of judgement we see in the comedy figure of Mrs Flanders, and the kind we still see exemplified in the Chief of Police, are the worst kind of judgementalism. That is, that they point the finger at people who are not like me. Or at least, they point the finger at people who I like to think are not like me. And by pointing the finger at them, I feel better about me and people like me. By pointing the finger at them, I can open up a gap between *them* and *me*.

Naturally, I have to be careful in singling out individuals who do this. Because, as many of you will have noticed, by pointing the finger at these individuals who point the finger at

others, I become every bit as much a finger pointer as any of them! By highlighting the naughtiness inherent in others who embody judgementalism, am I not becoming judgemental myself. And of course, the answer is Yes!

And what happens here is part of human nature. When we see people who disturb us, we retreat from them, into our own little world where we are always right and they are always wrong. I surround myself with people who will agree with me and affirm me and my opinions. And it's because it's a basic part of human nature to retreat from others, that it is a characteristic that surfaces in Israel over and over again. Lewis Misselbrook was a firebrand of a Baptist minister in the latter half of the twentieth century, and I had the privilege of being his minister for a few years. And at one Baptist Union council meeting he was invited to pray after a particularly hard debate, and began by saying, "Lord, we don't understand why you bless people we don't agree with..."

There is a whole nation, all descended from Abraham, who are the people of God, and they know that they are the people of God. But those nasty people out there are not the people of God. We are right, they are wrong. We are under God's blessing – they are under God's judgement.

And time after time in the history of Israel we see this dynamic at work. The people come to regard themselves as God's favourites. And from the prophet Amos to the apostle Paul, this entire tradition of pointing the finger at others has been radically undermined. Amos did this eight centuries before Christ, by working his way around all of Israel's neighbours, calling down woe upon all of them. So far so good, and his listeners would be clapping and cheering at the condemnation of those others. But in the end, Amos does the unthinkable and saying that it was Israel and Judah who – more than any other nation – deserve to be under the judgement of God. And the apostle Paul does exactly the same thing in his letter to the Romans – where he works through a bunch of sins that deserved God's judgement – and you can imagine his listeners clapping and cheering at the condemnation of others, before Paul concludes by saying, 'you yourself are doing the very same thing.'

If it is human nature, and Israel's nature, to point the finger of judgement at others – then there is a strong tradition in Scripture that says judgement does not begin in the judgement of the nations. Judgement begins at the household of God. Judgement begins unthinkably with us, not with those nasty people out there, but with us.

And this is precisely what John the Baptist is doing. How does he prepare the way of the Lord? He calls for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He refers to the people who come to be baptised as a vipers' brood. I notice that that is not part of any of the Services of Baptism in 'Gathering for Worship', our latest Baptist liturgical resource. He is not saying this to the people in Israel who least deserve it. The time has come for judgement to begin at the house of God. And by calling faithful Israel to be baptised in the River Jordan, he is basically saying that the current way of being Israel is not enough. Baptism marks the end of something old and the beginning of something new.

It is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This does not mean that we have to say sorry for these or those particular individual sins that are peculiar to me, so that we can wipe the slate clean and have healthy accounts before God. The forgiveness of sins for a twentieth century Evangelical has more in common with a mediaeval catholic than a first century Jew. For a first century Jew, before anything else, the forgiveness of sins meant the

forgiveness of very specific sins. Israel were sent into exile in Babylon because of her sins. It was an act of judgement for a whole nation. And once the nation's sins had been forgiven, she would return to the promised land to live the life for which they had been called as a nation. And in John's day, although people occupied the land, they felt that their hearts were still in exile.

The forgiveness of sins meant that the ear of God's blessing was beginning. And that era begins not with pointing the finger of judgement at others and thinking ha ha, God is blessing us but not you. That era of God's blessing begins by recognising that we are not worthy of it. That we are worthy of God's judgement and that we are receiving God's grace. That we are at least as worthy of God's judgement as anyone that we might like to refer to as 'them'!

That is how we prepare the way for the Lord. **By allowing judgement to begin at the household of God.** By allowing God to show us ourselves in a new light. And the baptisms of John, do that in the most radical way. Because part of being baptised, is dying. For faithful Israelites to be baptised, is to say that our entire way of being Israel is flawed. And in baptism we are putting to death, not only our beliefs, but something of who we are – in order that we might be remade in readiness to greet the coming Messiah.

Sabbath – Sabbatical stuff

Opportunity to take a step back, and to see yourself in a new light. For many, it's just become an excuse to engage in some kind of project. But at the heart of Sabbatical is this business of stopping altogether and encountering God in such a way that he has room to change who you are, right down to the roots. This is why the Baptist Union advises that ordained ministers take a sabbatical period of three months in every seven years of ministry. And I am very grateful to have benefited from this. To stop! But that does not mean that you just put your feet up for three months. Having written a phd about how we encounter God through reading, I decided to complement it with a work of exactly the same length that actually putting that research into practice. So I wrote a novel on the same subject as the Phd. Now, writing a novel does not simply mean reclining on a chaise long, drinking tea and dictating to a typist wearing a tweed suit. Stories are not simply entertainment. They have the capacity to draw you into a whole new world, and to leave you with a different way of encountering that world. I had to spend a month or so learning how to write story, and then the following two months putting into a first draft of about 70 000 words. The second draft will be ready at Christmas, and I'll be happy for any member of the church to have a look at it in the new year.

But the experience of a sabbatical has been the space to look at who I am and look at the world differently. And writing a story about a difficult set of moral issues, roots those issues in your personality and changes the way that you see things and people.

The sabbatical you have granted to me, like any sabbatical and in a smaller way like any Sabbath, has been an opportunity to allow to allow judgement to begin with me. To be able almost to take a step out of yourself and to see yourself, the world and others and God in a new way, so that you might just end up relating to all of those things in a new way. That is the purpose of a sabbatical, and I hope one that in some way I have, by God's grace, managed to achieve. But it is also the purpose of preparing the way for the Lord, of allowing judgement to begin at the house of God, to begin with me, and people just like me.