**Malachi 3: 1-4**

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

**Philippians 1: 3-11**

 I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

**Luke 3: 1-6**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,
‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
   make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
   and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
   and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

It’s probably only me – and maybe others of my generation – but I can’t hear this morning’s gospel reading without then having Prepare ye the way of the Lord, from Godspell – the David Essex original version –(but I WAS very young at the time) playing on a loop in my head for the rest of the day. Which means I’ve had it playing constantly for most of this week.

That aside, though…. What do we make of this passage? It delves right back into the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament, the prophecy that someone would come out from the people of Israel, who would be the one who made the road ready for the coming of the Messiah. And those of you who have had anything to do with Crossrail – or who have seen the excavations going on around the A14 – know what a massive task it is to make a new pathway of almost any kind. Isaiah talks about filling in the valleys and flattening down the hills, straightening out all the bends and corners, smoothing everything over. And while, of course, we don’t have to take it quite literally, it still gives us something to think about: how hard it can be to live this Christian calling of ours. And what it means to prepare the way for Jesus – not only in our own hearts and lives but to bring that good news to others too.

So John the Baptist’s was the voice in the wilderness calling for the path to be prepared for the coming of Jesus. And how did he say we should do that? By repentance of sins. And he did it by baptising people in the waters of the river Jordan, using the symbolism of washing clean. We’ll get part two of John’s story next week, so I don’t want to give too much away this morning. Watch this space next Sunday for the rest.

I think the whole wilderness image is an important one for Christians in general, and one that is worth exploring. Jesus went out into the wilderness to find solitude; and it was the place where he was tempted by Satan to do huge and spectacular miracles that would call attention to who he was……. but that was the last thing Jesus wanted at the time. So that wilderness was a place of alone-ness and some hardship perhaps, difficult times, trials, things to be overcome.

Yet when John was in the wilderness, it was a place he was at home – he was a bit of a wild man – the whole eating locusts and wild honey thing – and he wore weird clothing made of camel hair, which was probably really scratchy. And moreover, the wilderness was a place where people came because they wanted to follow John; they saw him as a leader and teacher and he had many more followers than Jesus at the time when Jesus started his ministry. Yet significantly, John always knew that Jesus was The One, and never failed to point his own followers towards Jesus.

So much then for John the Baptist and his call to repentance. I have said on many occasions before that Advent is a purple, penitential, preparational time in the church’s year. And so it is. And that gospel reading points us towards some thinking about sin and repentance, as is right and proper. John the Baptist – Mr Advent – is not there to help us coo over a baby, but he is there to lead us to an adult who is coming with judgement.

However there is a rather beautiful balance in the readings during Advent. We have on the one hand, death and hell and the second coming of Christ, but in the midst of that seriousness are some epistle readings all about thankfulness. Making the way straight is a lot of hard work, but we are called in the midst of all that to inhabit a place of joy.

 I thank my God, says Paul, every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. And so on.

Judgement. But then also joy.

If we are looking forward to the commercial and worldly and consumerist aspects of Christmas, we might actually not be too keen on Jesus arriving before Santa Claus does.

But if, on the other hand, we are an asylum seeker, trapped in a detention centre, with no way back home but no way forward to a new future either, or if we are a teenager who is routinely humiliated by workmates higher up the pecking order, or a Christian imprisoned for our faith in south-east Asia, an elderly person ripped off by yet another door-knocking sales con …then perhaps judgement cannot come soon enough.

It depends on where you are and where you stand as to whether John the Baptist’s message is comforting or confrontational. Preparing the way: what does it mean for us that John says that? There are things we do that may be hard but which can result in joy – things like saying sorry, showing gratitude, small ways but bigger ones too.

We present John as a stern figure but we must remember that the message he had to proclaim was a joyful one. There is the story of the visitation of the newly pregnant Mary to her relative Elizabeth, who was also pregnant with John the Baptist at the time. And when Mary shared her news, Elizabeth felt the baby John jump in her womb. We prepare now because we know that the time ahead will be joyful.

When people come to ask something of me at this time of year, they always preface it with: I know you’re really busy, but…. And yes I am, we all are; we all have full diaries not just at this time of year but all through the year. But that is precisely why we have to make wilderness time for ourselves. The promise in Isaiah chapter 40 is that comfort will come to God's people, that in the wilderness a way will be prepared for the Lord.

Wilderness time – time to breathe, to think, to meditate, to sit in church as I know a good many of us do, often when no one else is here – time to reflect on our day, to say sorry for the occasions when we were short-tempered or selfish but also to give thanks for a moment of laughter, for feeling close to those around us, for a connection with someone we probably won’t ever see again.

I used this phrase fairly recently, the one about Jesus coming and whether it was to comfort the afflicted or to afflict the comfortable. It isn’t either/or, it’s both/and. And wilderness time helps us all to know which we need on any given day.

So, yes, today we have to heed John The Baptist’s call to repentance, but as we do so, we need to look for the daystar rising, for the path being straightened, and we do that while still keeping ourselves aware of the joy of Christ that is here and is to come.

 **Amen**