

Sermon 05/12/21 Luke 3:1-6

Preparation

In my final two years at school Tuesday afternoons were set aside for 'appropriate' talks which ranged from advocating careers in the civil service to drama presentations. On one afternoon the topic was a 'One in five' talk. Now I'm guessing that unless you are at least as old as me, and a woman you won't know what that is.

The WRVS (they were still the women's voluntary service in those days) had been tasked by the government to talk to one in every five women about what they should do if nuclear war was imminent. The WRVS members had been going round to various women's groups giving these talks and it was not unnatural that they were including girls' schools. In fact, Hampshire were doing so well in their coverage that they had already exceeded the 20% target so I suppose it should more properly have been a 'one in four and a half talk'.

My memory is that we settled down expecting to be bored but quickly became enthralled in what we were hearing. Enthralled because this was not a to do list – buy candles and tins of beans, fill water containers, put new batteries in your radio. There was a large element of 'think about how you would do'.

I contrast this with a work colleague's mantra of – poor preparation leads to poor performance. He never went to a presentation without having planned how he would deal with every conceivable question that he might be asked. Every conceivable question. Although he was sometimes asked the inconceivable.

Preparation is very much the theme of today's readings. Preparation for Malachi for the coming of the messenger, in Luke for the ministry of Christ and in Paul's letter for the second coming. (At the time they thought it would be soon). Preparation that is in the 'think about how you would ,.....?' sort of a way.

John the Baptist was speaking to a Jewish nation still sensitive to the slavery in Egypt, to the exile in Babylon, and at that time struggling with the difficulties of Roman invading forces and sleazy local leaders. That is probably why Luke is so specific about when this took place. He wanted his readers to appreciate the context. Is there a comparison with our situation today? Well I suppose you could feel that the pressures of work and consumerism are a form of slavery. That the pressure to have a perfect Christmas can lead to fear. That our covid lockdowns are a form of exile. That the changing make up of our society, frequent house moves and job changes, makes it harder to form a community. I think we can recognise the sleazy leaders. The similarity is the discontent, despair and disempowerment that people feel.

At this time of year magazines and television are full of what to do to have the perfect Christmas. It all involves careful and detailed planning, buying the right things and making sure that everything you could conceivably want is available. But this specific planning often does not actually help when the unexpected comes along – and we all have experiences of that happening.

Isaiah as quoted in Luke talks of straightening paths and smoothing the way. Isn't that actually what we all want? Not glamour and excess, but lives uncomplicated by difficulties. Lives built on a resilience of thought that prepares us for an uncertain future full of the unexpected. John the Baptist's listeners understood that change was on its way, and that they needed to change themselves. But did any of them expect what actually happened next? The Jews thought that the

Messiah would arrive on a great horse and exercise military like power. What they got was a baby born in unconventional circumstances, and later a man living an unconventional life.

It is easy for us to get drawn in to the busyness of modern life – that desperate cry – ‘I haven’t got the time’. The self-consciousness of needing to ‘get it right’. Isaiah talks of ‘preparing the way’, that’s a pretty general sort of instruction which if we get it right will mean that ‘all mankind will see God’s salvation’. To me there is a message there about not all preparation being the same. About the differences being important. We have no more knowledge of what is coming next than those first century Jews – few people two years ago would have predicted the world-wide disruption caused by Covid. One of the best forms of preparation is to set our own house in order, to prepare ourselves to greet the unexpected, to make that our priority. People can always find time for what they really want to do.

When the glory of the Lord is revealed, there is a danger that many of us will be too busy to notice. Stuck with our noses in those lists and not able to feel the hairs on the back of our necks stand up as the Christmas gospel is read. We can decide to make ourselves available to notice, to be able to respond to what it says to us when it says it. When we drive on the motorway we don’t have to go in the fast lane. We can choose the alternative. To accept what is on offer, not what is asked for. In God’s adventure anything can happen.

In the modern world advent has become a time of frenetic busyness, dominated by to do lists and Christmas events, a contrast to the idea of it being a time of fasting in preparation for the great feast. At our one in five talk the speaker was suggesting that it was possible to boil water in an empty tin over a candle. ‘But how long would that take?’ someone asked. And the answer ‘But you would have the time’. We have the time for proper preparation if we choose to make it.