



05 December – 11 December 2021

### THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

This second week of Advent we focus on John the Baptist, but specifically on his message, which was for the people to "Prepare the way". Advent always calls out words like "waiting" and "preparation," and they are important words because, in our instant world, we are not good at practising them. Too much of our lives are spent in reaction to events, people, ideas, and circumstances. Too much of our time is filled with busyness and noise. It is hard to slow down, to listen, to wait, to prepare thoroughly for anything, let alone God's coming. Yet, John's message remains true – God is coming to us, and we need to prepare our hearts, and make a way into our lives for God to enter in.

Many spiritual teachers through the centuries have recommended silence and stillness as a way to prepare. These are good habits to nurture, but for many of us, our fast-paced lives make it very difficult to carve out time to be still and silent. For this reason, it is important that we also learn to do the work of preparation within the activities of our lives. When we can slow our minds and hearts down in the midst of conflict, we can find more helpful ways to communicate and find solutions. When we can slow down and prepare well for projects, events and people, we can ensure that we don't have to repeat work that wasn't done properly, or we can ensure that we have the necessary resources at our disposal.

Preparation is a big subject, and one that is crucial for our spiritual health. This will be the focus of our meditations this week.

### SUNDAY 05 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** Luke 3:1-6

**Reflect:** It's fascinating to see how Luke begins this section. He starts by listing all the important people who held power in the world

– politicians, kings and religious leaders. If God were going to speak, most people would assume it would have been to one of these important "movers-and-shakers". But that's not what happens. God bypasses all of these people of power and God's Word comes to an unknown stranger, living in the wilderness. Right from the start God's saving work subverts human systems of wealth, power and status. But, in God's purposes, John is no accident. Luke refers back to a prophecy of Isaiah and applies it to John. Like all prophecy this is probably a case of different layers of meaning – one for Isaiah's time and one for Luke's. The message, though, is clear. God has been preparing for this moment for a long time. Now the time has come for women and men to do their own work of preparation in order to receive God's gift.

It's easy to fall into the trap of expecting God's word to come only through those who are famous and powerful – celebrities, politicians, even well-known preachers or Christian musicians. But, if the Gospels teach us anything, it's that God's word usually comes in surprising and unexpected ways. So, if we want to hear God's message we need to release our obsession with fame and power, and prepare our hearts to recognise the still, hidden move of God.

How can you prepare yourself for God's word today?

**Do:** The practice of invocation, in which we invite God's Spirit to fill us and empower us, is essential if we are to learn to hear God's unexpected message through surprising voices. Today, invite God to speak to you and encounter you in new and unusual ways.

**Pray:** Come to me, O God, and surprise me with your word and your presence.

### MONDAY 06 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** Romans 8:22-25

**Reflect:** Waiting can be hard and painful. Hope inspires, but when the fulfilment is delayed, it can also be disheartening. In his letter to the Romans, Paul suggests that all of creation is in this state of waiting, along with human beings. We know that the world is not yet as it should be. We know that God's saving work is not yet

completed. And so, we long for that better world, that world of wholeness and unity for which Jesus died and rose.

But our waiting is not passive. We wait "eagerly" and, even though we don't always know how to pray, we wait prayerfully. This is waiting in expectation and preparation. It's waiting with hope in the coming of God's presence and salvation. And, as we wait, we have the presence and power of God's Spirit to work within us and through us so that we can participate in bringing into being that for which we wait. That's why Paul writes in verse 21 (just before the start of today's reading) that all creation waits for God's children to be revealed. It is as we recognise our place as God's children, living as agents of God's grace and salvation in the world, that the entire cosmos is healed. Each of us, in our own small way, has a part to play in bringing this new world into being.

What can you do today to wait with hope and expectation, and live as a child of God, helping to bring healing to the world?

**Do:** One of the most healing things we can do for one another is to really see each other and to welcome each other in God's name. When we dismiss and ignore others, we hurt and diminish them, but the simple act of greeting can bring tremendous healing and connection. Try it today.

**Pray:** By lovingly welcoming others, I participate in bringing your salvation into the world, O God.

## TUESDAY 07 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** 2 Peter 1:2-15

**Reflect:** Responding to the call of Christ is not a single act. Faith is not a destination, even though it is often portrayed as if it is. Rather, our response to Jesus is simply the beginning (or more likely, the next step) of a journey of faith that takes us through our entire lives and beyond. As we reflect on the Advent call to preparation and waiting, it is important that we embrace the "process-nature" of our faith. When we think we've "arrived" we have nothing to prepare for, nothing to wait for. When our hope is only about some otherworldly bliss which comes to us only after death, we have no need to do the work of faith in this life. But this letter seeks to encourage the early

believers to continue to live their faith daily. They were to continue to grow and to learn to receive God's resources for living the Christ-following life. If they managed to do this, they would enter God's Reign – which meant that now, in this life, they would know what it was to experience God's Reign in their own lives.

This teaching resonates both with the preaching of John the Baptist and with the Advent call. As we wait for God's Reign to fill our lives and our world, we do so actively by learning to be people of moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness and love. Then, as we embody these qualities, the Reign of God begins to be manifest both within us and through us, and we become true Advent people.

Which of these qualities do you most need to nurture in yourself today?

**Do:** In Ignatian spirituality a primary practice is known as the "prayer of examen". This prayer is a reflective examination of our lives, asking God's Spirit to reveal where we are doing well, and where we need to grow and change. Using Peter's qualities as a guide, practice the prayer of examen in your own life today.

**Pray:** Show me, O God, where I still need to grow to become more like Jesus.

## WEDNESDAY 08 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** Luke 7:18-30

**Reflect:** When we read of how highly Jesus valued John the Baptist, it is comforting to know that even John had doubts. According to Matthew's Gospel, John sent his disciples to Jesus while he was in King Herod's prison. Luke mentions John's arrest in chapter three, so it seems like this is the likely scenario. Clearly, in his time of suffering, John was questioning. He needed to know whether his preaching had done its job, but it seems that Jesus' ministry was a surprise even to John. So, John sends these messengers to make sure. Jesus' words in response would have been both an encouragement and a challenge to John, calling him to faithfulness in the face of his great sacrifice.

When Jesus turns to the crowds to speak about John, he makes two things clear. Firstly, John is the one who prepares the way, which means that Jesus is God's promised One. Secondly, Jesus considers John, who was not wealthy or powerful or prominent in any usual way, great. Yet, those who live as true citizens of God's Reign are even greater! These are the ones who respond to John's call to repentance and who give themselves to God's upside-down way of living.

How are you living as one of the "great ones" in God's Reign today?

**Do:** The messages of both John and Jesus were framed around a single, powerful idea – repentance. To repent means to acknowledge that we must change in order to embrace a new way of living. Such repentance should be a feature of every Christ-follower's life. Today, repent – change – anything in your life that still needs to come under the influence of God's Reign.

**Pray:** May my life embody, a little more today, the Good News of your Reign, O God.

#### THURSDAY 09 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** Amos 6:1-8

**Reflect:** Today's passage could have been written yesterday! The prophet Amos, who was an outspoken critic of the dry, ritualised worship of the Temple, challenges the wealthy and powerful people who thought they were invincible. These elites thought that their possessions, protected homes, connections and positions would provide security and ensure that their privileged lifestyles would continue forever. But the prophet reminds them of other cities, which had enjoyed the same privilege, but had been destroyed. In the coming exile, the wealthy would be the first to be carried off, he warns, because they "care nothing about the ruin of their nation". Their worship, which should have changed them and made them people of justice and compassion, had become empty ritual with no transforming power, and so they would ultimately face the consequences of their actions.

Amos' message is strongly aligned with those of John the Baptist and Jesus. They also called for justice and compassion, and they

also warned that we will all ultimately face the consequences of our actions. This is why we need times like Advent when we can take stock of our lives and assess how well we are living according to the principles of Jesus. This does not necessarily mean that we need to stage great protests or engage in large, public actions. Rather, in whatever situation we find ourselves, we are called to bring life, peace, goodness and love into the lives of those around us. And our worship is intended to teach us how to live like this, and to change our hearts to become people of true justice and compassion.

How is your worship changing you today?

**Do:** In our worship we celebrate God's nature and we embrace the ways of God's Reign in word and action. Our praise is meant to capture our hearts with a vision of God's Reign so we can live it out each day. Spend today reminding yourself of God's love and justice by giving praise to God at every opportunity.

**Pray:** I praise you, O God, for your Reign of love and justice.

#### FRIDAY 10 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** Isaiah 12:2-6

**Reflect:** Isaiah's prophecy has some tough words of judgement. But it also has some of the most hopeful and encouraging words of comfort. Today's reading comes between a prophecy of judgement on God's people and on Assyria who, according to the prophet, is God's instrument of judgement, and a similar prophecy against Babylon. But here in between, in Isaiah 11 and 12, there is a promise of a new leader, grown out of the root of David's dynasty, but bringing justice and peace to God's people. That's why today's reading is a song of praise and thanksgiving for God's presence and salvation. In this new leader, God's people experience God coming to them, and they naturally respond in praise for God's grace and mercy. From a New Testament perspective, this promise is seen to be fulfilled in Jesus, who did exactly this saving work not just for Israel, but for all humanity.

Here in Isaiah, the prophet is a messenger, preparing the people for this Coming One. In our Advent journey, we reflect on John the Baptist as such a messenger preparing people for the coming of

Jesus. Now, in our own time, we have other messengers to prepare us – the Scriptures, our Christian companions, God's Holy Spirit. And, as we prepare our own hearts, so we are also able to be messengers to others.

How can you drink more deeply from the wells of salvation, and proclaim God's goodness in your life today?

**Do:** We often think of prayer as an attempt to get God to do what we want or need. But prayer is really about preparing our hearts to follow God's leading, and to participate in God's saving work. Today, in your prayers, open your heart to the God who comes to you, and open your life to proclaim God's salvation to others.

**Pray:** May your presence come to our world in need, O God, and may my life proclaim your coming.

## SATURDAY 11 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** Luke 1:57-66

**Reflect:** If ever there was a person who embodied the humility, grace, challenge and commitment that God's Reign asks of its citizens, John the Baptist is that person. He appears in the Gospels for a short time to prepare the people for Christ's coming, and then he willingly disappears to make space for the incarnate One. His role is just a supporting one, but this does not mean that God's preparation of him was any less significant.

Luke's Gospel places the birth stories of John and Jesus in parallel, showing that, while John is subservient to Christ, he is nonetheless important in Christ's story. In today's reading we saw how, at John's circumcision and naming ceremony, John's parents followed God's guidance and gave him a name that was not from their family – a strange thing to do in those days. Then, in confirming this choice of name, Zechariah got his voice back, which he had lost when John's birth was first announced. The people who witnessed this event responded with awe and wonder, certain that God's hand was on this child in a special way.

It is not just the prominent and powerful who know the touch of God's hand. Even the quietest and most "ordinary" follower of Christ

is able to participate in God's saving work and is, therefore, touched by God. In what ways can you see God's hand on your life today?

**Do:** The ministries of John and Jesus both required a response from their parents, and from themselves. God called, but all of these people had to accept the call. In the same way God is calling you to some ministry, however small. Today, at every opportunity you get to live out your call, pray a prayer of acceptance and commitment.

**Pray:** I accept your call on my life, O God, and I commit to following your ways.