

Sermon:

'...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.' 'Prepare the way of the Lord'.

Be prepared... Am I the only person here who suffers from anxiety dreams? I'm looking for some signs of recognition, or this could be a bit embarrassing. Most of us suffer from them at one time or another and many people have a particular recurring one.

My recurring anxiety dream is always about being late, of not being ready. It's changed throughout my life. When I was younger, I played hockey a lot and I used to dream that I was about to play in the Olympic final, but I was late and couldn't find my kit. In all my times dreaming it, I've never been ready; I've never made it out onto the pitch. Later in my life, after I had finished teaching, I used to dream (and sometimes still do), that I'd started a new job at a new school, but couldn't find the classroom or the lesson plan that I was due to teach. Possibly sadder still, and absolutely true, is the fact that my anxiety dream is now often coming to a big church, having to preach at a service, usually in front of the Archbishop of Canterbury, but realising that I haven't got time to dash to the vestry, put my robes on, or find my sermon. Of course, nothing like that could ever happen in real life... I don't think Justin Welby is due in Marwood any time soon. But in all three dreams, there is the stress caused by not being ready.

Talking of not being ready, do you realise that there are only 20 days to go? Have you done your shopping? Have you written your cards? Have you worked out who's visiting whom? If the answer is no to any or all of the above, then welcome to my world! But all the gift-buying, the frenetic shopping, the reluctant Christmas letter-writing can if we're not careful, feel a bit overwhelming, even if not on the scale of being late for the Olympics. The pressure of preparing for Christmas is keenly felt.

And this is ironic, because it's right and proper that we should be preparing: the season of Advent is all about waiting, preparing and looking forward to the coming of Christ. It's hard to see this clearly sometimes, as we get caught up in our shopping. But every now and then we can catch a glimpse of something bigger. Bath Christmas market takes place in the shadow of Bath Abbey, and the Abbey actually puts on short carol services for shoppers to drop into, so that they can pause, take time out, and reflect for a short while on what and who it is that we are truly preparing for. It might be a helpful

image for us this month: pause for a moment, take time out. Remember what's really going on, behind all the tinsel, turkey and Tia Maria.

'...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.'

This isn't a very Christmassy verse is it? Instead of snow, we've got the heat of the rocky desert. Instead of shepherds in tea towels and cuddly sheep, we've got the unsettling figure of John the Baptist, the sort of person you'd try not to sit next on the bus, and instead of 'peace on earth and goodwill to all people' we have his stark call to repent and be baptised.

This might not sound Christmassy – but you can't have Christmas without it.

When John came out of the desert, his countrymen were looking forward to a changed world. Knowing themselves to be God's chosen people, the nation of Israel had had to grapple with the trauma of national failure and exile, and eventual subjugation under the brutal rule of the world empire of Rome. Like us, they longed for God to change the world, to overthrow injustice, to wipe out sin and greed, to take charge of things once and for all. They longed for the coming of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, and they often had quite clear ideas about who was going to be allowed into that kingdom and who was going to be cast out.

John, the desert prophet, announces the good news: the longed-for kingdom is near: in fact more than that, it's fast approaching! Prepare the way of the Lord! We need to get ready! Good news for the crowds that flocked to hear him, but that was only half of John's message. If God is coming to change the world, said John, we ourselves have to be ready to change. If God is bringing in a kingdom of justice, peace, reconciliation, where the wolf will lie down with the lamb, then we have to be ready to enter into that new world. We have to be ready to be changed – we have to repent.

'Repent': it's one of those words, isn't it? It often evokes feelings of guilt and shame, even among Christians, especially where Christian leaders in the past have manipulated people's vulnerability for their own ends (and it has happened, sad to say in all ages and in all types of Christianity). I can remember going through a village in the Romanian countryside a few years ago, hearing the Orthodox villagers refer to their Baptist neighbours mockingly as 'the Repenters' – labelling them as a group who were unhealthily preoccupied with sin and guilt; unfairly, I might add. Repent is a

strong word, and it can arouse strong reactions. What does John mean by it, and why does it belong in Advent?

As someone who can quite easily feel guilty for England, the most helpful way I can think of repentance is looking at the word in the Greek of the New Testament, where the word is *metanoia*. *Metanoia* means to change, to change your mind, to go beyond your current thinking, to see the world in a new way.

Now, part of that might well be seeing where I sin and fall short of God's will for my life, and it's important to keep short accounts with God, hence having the confession every time we meet together on a Sunday. But we do so recognizing that forgiveness was actually God's idea, not ours and he gave up everything precisely in order that we could be forgiven. So really repentance is ultimately a joyful thing: but *metanoia* is more than that.

A few years ago we had to move my Dad from his home in Cambridge to a retirement home near Weston, where he was much nearer to me and my sister and our families, and where he could receive the care and support he needed. Dad had lived in the same house in Cambridge since 1959, and he and my mum were one of those couples who kept everything, and I mean everything. Children's clothes, cuddly toys, old computers, suitcases from the dark ages, books from before the war, all neatly boxed and labelled and crammed into the attic.

Changing where Dad was to live involved a huge amount of clearing out. And getting Dad's new house ready, with his familiar things arranged there to welcome him when he arrived, took a huge amount of effort as well. I claim no credit for it, as my sister did most of it, and it is not a unique experience, because many of us will have resettled our parents. But it's a good image of repentance. *Metanoia*, can involve getting rid of things that are not needed any longer, and rearranging other things in a new way, so that we can be welcomed into a new life.

In other words, Repentance, *Metanoia* is about getting ready, being prepared for change. Brownies have a Brownie pocket, in which they keep things ready for emergencies. Or so I've heard. I wasn't in the Brownies, but I was in the Cubs, and I can remember that our motto was 'be prepared'. To this day, I'm not sure what I was meant to be prepared for (maybe that's why I dream about being unprepared!) But 'be prepared' is quite a good motto for Advent. We prepare to be changed, because at Christmas, we celebrate a changed world. Purpose, meaning and love have come to us in a little baby, Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, and this changes everything.

So, get ready, John says. Don't be like the scribes and Pharisees, or the chief priests and the petty kings, or even like the Romans, who all refused to believe that they would ever need to change. The Messiah is coming, repent and be baptised, says John; all flesh shall see the salvation of our God, says Isaiah; it's going to be fierce, like precious metal refined in a furnace, or dirty clothes scrubbed out with soap says Malachi. Old Testament and New Testament prophet alike say to us: Be prepared. Be prepared to be changed, be prepared to think again, be prepared to see the world in a new way; be prepared to welcome Jesus, Saviour, Messiah and king.

'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 the Lord, when he comes, find us watching and waiting. Even so. come Lord Jesus. Amen.