

Snow fell in the North last week. The people there will be grateful for those who clears a path through their snow. Also what a relief we feel when a policeman appears at a traffic jam on a busy road and clears a route for us to proceed. Or think of your pleasure when you find someone has provided some stepping stones to enable you to cross a stream. We like our paths to be made easier. “Make a straight way for the Lord” says, St John (1.23), repeating Isaiah’s prophesy in the Old Testament: I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord”.

The phrase catches our imagination, just as it caught the imagination of the Gospel writers, St Matthew and St John. Its original use was by Isaiah, but it is common for several of his words to be applied to the ministry of John the Baptist. Used in both the Old and New Testaments, it is a declaration of intent; of God’s intention to redeem his people, and an announcement that there would be a forerunner. God’s coming amongst us, always requires prophets to make a highway or path straight before him. We as the church exist to announce, to prepare, to express, his coming into the hearts of men and women.

This means by our making his message clear in our speaking to others. That was what John the Baptist did. He was a kind of personification of the Old Testament itself. He left people in no doubt of what the kingdom of God was about. As far as he was concerned, it was about repentance, judgement, and justice. Listen to any

discussion of religion; be it by amateurs around us; or by so-called experts on the media; and you will realize just how much misunderstanding and ignorance there is about Christianity. Of course, there are plenty of people who do not want to hear. Or who prefer Christianity to seem to be obscure, because then it is easier to attack. But in the last resort, it is us who must bear the blame if our message is misunderstood, for it has probably not been stated clearly enough.

Why is this? In spite of what you might think, it is not all my fault – or the fault of other preachers! There are umpteen reasons, but two particular ones which are bound up with our faith. Firstly, because ours is a historical faith we can leave it in history, and fail to apply it to the contemporary setting. For example: many Carol services will begin with a reading from the book of Genesis, with the assumption that its meaning is obvious; but it isn't to most people. After all, what has the serpent in the Garden of Eden to do with Christmas? This is why the explanation is given in the preface which readers should use. That God promises that eventually mankind will obtain victory over temptation and evil, represented by the serpent; through Jesus' birth. Also, it has been said that the Magnificat, which is sung at Evensong, is more revolutionary than the singing of the "Red Flag". For the event it commemorates, the birth of Jesus, changed the whole course of history. Yet we seldom express that by our singing of it; or by our living of it.

Again the many-sidedness of our faith can confuse. Some people grasp at the idea that it has something to do with life beyond the grave; so they become Spiritualists. Others think it has something to do with physical healing in this life; so they become Christian Scientists. For others it is something else that is emphasized. We can get all sorts of “bees in our bonnet”, and thereby fail to command or grasp that which is central to the whole faith. Every local Church needs to ensure that its celebration of Christmas clearly gets over what Christmas is about. Namely that God cares, and he shows us he cares.

John the Baptist’s words left people in no doubt about the kingdom of God. His way of life did the same. It was a life of austerity and dedication. That does not mean that we are meant to be kill-joys of the Christmas feast; like the original Scrooge. It means not austerity, but rather a simplicity of living without gross extravagance or wastefulness. We need to be people who can enjoy and appreciate all the good things of life, all the gifts of creation, yet not to think of them as totally indispensable: to have a willingness to know what to take, and what to do without. Christmas has become such a complicated time.

More important to us are those who stress in their actions, the real values of life. Of love, friendship, thought, concern. We must try to work this out, if we are to make the way clear; to make the path straight. All of us must prepare the Lord’s way, both by our speaking and our living. John the Baptist is an example of both, though of

course we live in a different era with different circumstances. (I don't mind eating the honey but don't fancy the locusts!) There is however, a characteristic of Christian people which could not be true of John. For we live on the right side of the events for which he prepared; on the right side of Christmas; as well as of Easter and Pentecost.

St Paul put his finger on the point when he spoke to the Thessalonians (5.16) of "being joyful (in the Lord) always". He spoke of a joy that is different from our merry-making. It is not an unfounded optimism; nor a sense of well-being created by warmth and wine. It is a sharing in the victory of love, which is disclosed by these august events of the Gospel. We share this even among the anguish which belongs to much of the world.

This is our paradox, as we prepare the way for the Lord in our contemporary world. For we not only say that we are preparing for his Second Coming; we also say that he has already come again. Like so many things, it is not so much a conflict of opinion, rather more a question of degree, which is relative to each of us individually. But either way we can help to prepare the way of the Lord for others, by making sure first that our own paths are not crooked but straight.

Before I retired, someone said to me that she would not be at church on Christmas Day because she had to prepare the food for six visitors. She looked crestfallen when I told her

that I would be cooking for eight people, but would be still taking the service! Who doesn't have to prepare food at Christmas? So let us use this coming Christmas-tide not only to share our food and friendship, but to try to help at least one other person come closer to the love of Almighty God, as revealed by the birth of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, by celebrating his birthday in church - as well as our food and friendship.