**9th December 2018**

**Luke 3.1-6; Malachi 3.1-4**

Our scripture passages today are all about making preparations.

How are your preparations going for Christmas?

A middle-aged woman posted her Christmas wish list on the fridge for her husband to read. Rather than list certain items of desire she requested ‘something that will make me look sexy and beautiful’. When Christmas rolled around, she expected to open a package with some fancy lingerie inside. To her surprise, he gave her an exercise bike instead! They are now divorced!

I remember asking an eight-year-old girl once what she was going to give her brother for Christmas. ‘I don’t know’ she answered.

‘What did you give him last year?’ I said.

‘Chicken pox’ was her reply.

In Washington a TV reporter was working on an assignment called ‘The Spirit of Christmas’. So he called the British Embassy and asked to speak to the British Ambassador.

‘Ambassador’ the reporter said, ‘you have been very kind to us through the year and we would like to include you in a Christmas news segment we’re going to run. Tell me, what would you like for Christmas?’

The Ambassador replied, ‘I’m very touched by your offer, but I must decline to accept any gift’.

‘oh please’, said the reporter, ‘you really have been very helpful to us, so won’t you please tell me what you would especially like for Christmas?’

Again, the Ambassador refused but the reporter persisted, and he finally gave in. ‘All right then, if you insist. This Christmas I would like as jar of mint jelly’.

Having forgotten about the conversation, the Ambassador was surprised, several weeks later when he turned on the evening news and heard the same reporter introducing a segment on ‘The Spirit of Christmas’

The reporter said ‘We recently interviewed three visiting ambassadors and asked them what they would like for Christmas. These three diplomats each gave revealing answers when they pondered what they would most like during this Christmas season of goodwill.

The German ambassador said ‘I would like to see a peaceful and prosperous year ahead for all citizens of the planet. May God bless us all’.

The Swiss Ambassador said ‘May the spirit of Christmas last throughout the year. It is my dream that our world leaders will be guided toward a common goal of peaceful coexistence. This is my wish this Christmas season.

And then we asked the British Ambassador, who said ‘I would like a jar of mint jelly!’

Well, you could argue, at least he’s more likely to get what he asked for.

I don’t know what Theresa May wants to get for Christmas – but it’s unlikely to be her Brexit deal if all the mood music at parliament proves accurate come Tuesday this week.

We are looking at the theme of Peace-making this Advent as we prepare for the coming of Jesus: The Prince of Peace.

Blessed are the peacemakers he said. In our national and international relations – what makes for peace. Beyond our posturing and polices – what will build peace – or are we just focused on our own narrow needs and a jar of mint jelly? Over 70 years of peace in mainline Europe can make us complacent about the need always to work for peaceful coexistence.

In our personal preparations for Christmas are we too self-focussed, ‘**I’d like** a jar of mint jelly’. Are we lacking in ambition and in scope? Instead of making peace and sharing goodwill and the message of our Saviour, the prince of Peace – we just want a jar of mint jelly?

Charles Swindoll writes:

Some gifts you can give this Christmas are beyond monetary value:

Mend a quarrel;

Dismiss suspicion;

Tell someone, ‘I love you’.

Give something away – anonymously.

Forgive someone who has treated you wrong.

Turn away wrath and anger with a soft calm answer.

Visit someone in a nursing home.

Apologise if you were wrong.

Be especially kind to someone with whom you work.

Give as God gave to you in Christ, without obligation, or announcement, or reservation, or hypocrisy.

Don’t just settle for a jar of mint jelly. Be a peacemaker this Christmas. Enter into the true Spirit of Christmas – the Spirit of Jesus.

It needs a transformation of our desires and outlook. It needs a transformation of the heart – to prepare for peace and peace-making.

Our scripture passages today are all about making preparations.

According to the gospel of Luke, John the Baptizer comes as a messenger preparing the way for the Lord. He preaches that people should prepare themselves for the Lord’s coming by receiving baptism as sign of repentance.

Luke puts John the Baptist firmly located within history. Luke lists Tiberius, Emperor of Rome; Herod, the ruler of Galilee; Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea; and high priests Annas and

Caiaphas as contemporaries of John. These details would have offered credibility to John’s prophetic word in the minds of the first readers of Luke’s gospel and, in turn, would have strengthened the authenticity of the stories attributed to Jesus in this gospel.

Many people today believe that our faith is make believe. That the story of Jesus is comparable to a fairy story – wishful thinking, fantasy, something for the children! Stand up and give the evidence that it is rooted in history and changed history and can change us today, particularly the human heart.

This Christmas season many will despair and feel there is no hope, no light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. We will be prepared to share the light we have received?

During the recent recession, one commentator on television began his newscast by saying, "Due to the current financial crisis, the light at the end of the tunnel will be turned off." The world turns off lights. Christians turn them on - look around you, in your neighbourhoods, in this season. Light (especially light at the end of a tunnel) represents hope. Something that pierces the darkness.

We have good news to share. News of peace on earth and goodwill to all people.

Luke was probably written shortly after 70 AD for a Gentile audience. One of the key themes in Luke is that God’s salvation – manifested in Jesus – is for all people.

John travelled in the region around the Jordan River, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Such a baptism was not new with John. Beginning around the 6th century BC, Gentiles who became Jewish were expected to undergo a ritual of immersion that came to be called “proselyte baptism.” Later, some groups of Jews connected these immersions with repentance. *Repentance* is translated from a Greek word ‘metanoia’ that means “have a change of mind” or “go beyond the mind you have.” Repentance depicts a change of life and heart.

Billy Graham, who often played the 20th century role of John the Baptizer, had these comments about the disease running rampant in our world: "We're suffering from only one disease in the world. Our basic problem is not a race problem. Our basic problem is not a poverty problem. Our basic problem is not a war problem. In the light of the important conference in Poland this week he could’ve added our basic problem is not a climate change problem. Our basic problem is a heart problem. We need to get the heart changed, the heart transformed. Where is the will, the heart – to tackle climate change? Where is the will, the heart, to tackle poverty, racism, bring peace”?

What a message for us at Advent! "Let every heart/Prepare him room" we sing. Perhaps we would do well to say let every heart get out the bulldozers and cranes, the rock crushers and road graders:  
  
There are mountains that need to come down - mountains of racism, sexism, ageism, and any other "ism" that blocks our way to healthy relationships with one another and with our Lord.  
  
There are valleys to be filled - valleys of depression, despair, loneliness, grief, pain, any of which can keep us from the rich relationship the Saviour offers and that keep us from enjoying the fellowship of he faith.  
  
There are crooked places to be made straight - yes, there is perversity, even among those we might never imagine; fine exteriors mask rotten interiors of abuse, neglect, immorality, even violence.  
  
There are rough places to be made smooth - rough places that have come because of oppression and injustice.  
  
There is work to do! Bring on the heavy equipment!

Max Lucado tells the story of a man who had been a closet slob most of his life. He just couldn't comprehend the logic of neatness. Why make up a bed if you're going to sleep in it again tonight? Why put the lid on the toothpaste tube if you're going to take it off again in the morning? He admitted to being compulsive about being messy.  
  
Then he got married. His wife was patient. She said she didn't mind his habits . . . if he didn't mind sleeping on the couch. Since he did mind, he began to change. He said he enrolled in a 12-step program for slobs. A physical therapist helped him rediscover the muscles used for hanging up shirts and placing toilet paper on the holder. His nose was reintroduced to the smell of Airwick and Glade. By the time his in-laws arrived for a visit, he was a new man.  
  
But then came that moment of truth. His wife went out of town for a week. At first, he reverted to the old man. He figured he could be a slob for six days and clean up on the seventh. But something strange happened. He could no longer relax with dirty dishes in the sink or towels flung around the bathroom or clothes on the floor or sheets piled up like a mountain on the bed.

What happened? Simple. He had been exposed to a higher standard of living. That's what confession and repentance do for us. That's what Jesus does for us.

The phrase, “the word of God came to John” identifies John as God’s prophet. John recalls the words of the great Hebrew prophet Isaiah and reaffirms that the promise of God’s salvation is for “all flesh.” One way to understand this salvation is being

“delivered from evil or danger,” especially any evil or danger that would separate us from God. Salvation shares the same roots as the word *salve*, a treatment for wounds that enables healing. Deliver us from evil.

A parable is told of a farmer who owned an old mule. The mule fell into the farmer's well. The farmer heard the mule braying and went to the site. After assessing the situation, the farmer sympathized with the mule but decided that neither the mule nor the well was worth the trouble of saving. Instead he called his neighbours and asked them to bring their shovels and bury the poor mule and put him out of his misery.  
  
The mule seemed hysterical. When the dirt struck his back, he shook it off. As the farmer and his friends continued to shovel a thought struck the farmer. After each shovel of dirt was thrown onto the mule he said, "Shake it off and step up." The mule did what he asked, after every shovel of dirt. After a time, the old mule stepped triumphantly out of the well. What seemed to bury him actually became his road to freedom.  
  
There is an alternative to every impossible situation. The way is not always visible to us. But our task is not to work miracles, that is up to God. Our responsibility is to prepare the way, committing every ounce of energy we have to the possibility of the transforming and delivering power of God, remembering that a single act of kindness can bring hope to generations yet to come.

In our personal lives we may feel that we are being swamped – that the dirt and mess keeps piling up. Where are we going to find deliverance? How can we prepare the way for the Lord? Be open to alternatives and that word from God to deliver and lead us forward.

I know a couple who had become estranged from their son. A gulf of separation had grown up. They decided to take the small step of sending him a Christmas card. They wrote on it ‘we miss you. So sorry for all that has happened. We love you Mum and dad.’

It was a small act, a gesture. But it was an olive branch. An offer of peace that thankfully he took up and responded and a work of reconciliation began.

Sometimes sadly, the olive branch is rejected.

Jesus well knows that the offer of peace can be rejected by our hurt, proud and broken humanity. But the responsibility for those who follow Christ is to make the offer.

God’s prophets call us to prepare the way – in our lives and in our communities – for the gift of God’s saving love in Jesus the Prince of Peace.

May God give us ambition and desire to think big, beyond the jars of mint jelly, to prepare for Peace and work for peace – peace with God, peace with each other.

Prepare the way of the Lord.