

## **06 December 2020: The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 40 1-11**

*A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* (40:3)

These words are echoed at the beginning of Mark's Gospel by John the Baptist. *Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God:* Why does God tell people *they* are to make God's highway straight? If God is all-powerful, you would think God could make his own travel arrangements.

Of course, the invitation to prepare God's way is what I would call a literal metaphor, that is, it is not about road grading, asphalt paving or erecting traffic lights, but it is about real preparations.

We prepare the Lord's way by desiring with urgency and at-the-finger-tips expectancy God's swift, deep, and personal arrival in one's life and in the world. Children, sometimes adults, have urgent expectation about Christmas morning. One's desire for God's arrival in our lives is to look like that says the prophet. We are called to make the highway straight because God's work in the world always includes a call for God's people to become what God is doing. I am going to repeat that, because it is so very important: God's work in the world always includes a call for God's people to become what God is doing.

This is the reason "fairy-tale" prayers go unanswered. "Fairy-tale" prayers ask God to make *our* way straight and smooth: 'God take away this, change that, give so-and-so a personality transplant, let me win the lottery.' Fairy-tale prayers ask God to alter situations and people around us while expecting to remain unchanged ourselves. Implicit in every prayer is the desire and offering of oneself to be, somehow, among those through whom God works. This is so even with 'big' prayers. We pray for peace in the world; yet how can we expect God to touch the minds and hearts of distant enemies if we are not willing to be instruments for peace in our homes and relationships, in our workplaces and communities? To want God to answer prayer always means we offer ourselves to be people through whom God works here and now, in our relationships and environments. *We prepare the way of the Lord* by offering ourselves, our lives as a way for God to be present and active in the world. Here are three ways in which we may actively do this.

First, repentance: these are the first words of Jesus in Mark's Gospel (1:15): *Repent, for the kingdom of God is near.* Repentance begins with admitting our wrongs, but quickly moves to the heart of repentance: actively turning to the way of God. The word 'repentance' means literally 'turning around'. Repentance is not about guilt, shame or wallowing in regret. Repentance is desiring God to change our lives; to become people in whom God's reconciliation and holiness are manifest in this world. As we say each Sunday in the general confession: *that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways.*

Second, we prepare the way of the Lord by taking it one step at a time. Here is wisdom the 12-Step tradition gives: one day at a time, one step at a time, even one moment at a time. This centers us in our lives as they are and gives us patience with ourselves, others, and God. One step at a time is crucial because right now is what we have. The past cannot be changed, only regretted; the future is yet to be and therefore does not exist. Every encounter, action, word, thought can prepare God's way today.

Third, if we had a southern translation, it would read: *Prepare the way of the Lord, all y'all!* We are not independent contractors. In the Bible the invitation is to join in the community to prepare God's way. Sometimes some will fall behind, and the rest must slow down to stay together. Those who fall behind are encouraged and helped to catch up. Sometimes someone staggers under a heavy load, and we must lighten their burden by sharing it with them. Sometimes we will feel worn out and must accept others' help. Sometimes we will carry those worn out, and sometimes someone carries us. Just as preparing God's way is not the work of a moment, neither is it the work of an individual. It is "all y'all's" vocation.

*A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* God help us prepare our lives, our parish, for you; and help us do what is right today, that the world, too, may be prepared for your coming.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.