

**Advent 2, Year C**  
**San Eugenio & San Blas, Tenerife**  
**10.15 & 12pm Eucharists, 8.12.2024**  
**Lk3v1-6**

***Lord, open to us the treasures of your wisdom. In the name of Christ. Amen***

*Prepare the way of the Lord!*

Two plays. The first a notorious play in London 60 years ago began with the body of a nurse - lying at the side of the stage as the audience filed in. As the Daily Telegraph reported, one evening a gentleman walked up to an attendant and said he was very worried: were they sure the young lady wasn't lying in a draught!

The second play, I actually saw, performed in the small, intimate theatre above the Royal Court Theatre. This time the entire cast of 4 people, was present as the audience came in. The stage area was the open space in the middle of the circles of chairs. These actors moved quietly round, as if getting things ready. About 10 minutes after the posted start time, an irate voice within the audience enquired if the play was ever going to start. - Was he was a plant? We were certainly left in no doubt as to the fact that the play had already begun.

A well acted play doesn't just happen. It all takes weeks and weeks of careful planning. Whatever the undertaking, preparation and planning are very important. The stage has to be set. And that is what God is doing in our Gospel reading, what John the Baptist is doing, what Luke is doing. Let's take them the other way round.

Luke is the thorough chronicler. The when, where, who and why are vitally important to him, to guarantee the authenticity of what he is saying. To Luke, the emergence of John the Baptist was one of those hinges on which history turned. So he sets that emergence against the world background of the Roman Empire. He enumerates details of Emperor, local governors in Palestine and the High Priest in order to state firmly that he is writing about

historical events, of AD28-29, of religious and political significance, on the local and worldwide stage.

That is the "when". The "where" is *all the regions around the Jordan*; the "who" in this scene is *John, son of Zechariah*; the "why" is that *the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness*.

With 2½ verses Luke has set the scene in time and place, identified the principle actor and given a reason.

John's role is to set the stage for his cousin, for Jesus. He sets it by quoting the prophet Isaiah. *Prepare the way of the Lord!*

In the ancient middle east, when a king planned a tour of part of his dominions, he would send a courier to get the roads improved, - make sure there were no nasty potholes. Isaiah had used the image to encourage people to prepare their hearts and minds, their way of life, to be right with God. That is the image that John picks up. - the King is coming, - but it's not their roads they need to mend, - it's their lives.

The Jews knew their history. By quoting Isaiah, John knew the people would listen, repent and come forward for baptism. And John reminds them that: *All flesh shall see the salvation of God*.

The Jews had been told time and again that God was God for the whole world, for all people, but they constantly needed reminding. John is preparing the people for when they hear this same great message from Jesus.

Luke sets the stage for his account. John sets the stage for Jesus' ministry. And God? What stage is he setting? This passage is reaching the culmination of all God's preparations throughout the centuries of the OT.

From the moment of humanity's creation, the stage had to be set for the coming of Jesus Christ. Humanity was created with that great gift of free will, that gift which has so often been portrayed as

a burden. Without it we would be puppets, there would be no growth, because no lessons to be learned.

But free will has its inherent dangers, and throughout history God has been there to guide and help. And the ultimate assistance, the sacrifice of God's own Son, Jesus Christ, could not happen without God setting the stage.

Humanity had to develop physically, intellectually, socially, spiritually. And we see the various steps in that process stretching through the OT. The gradual realisation that the God who spoke to Abraham and Moses was greater than all other gods - and then that he is the only God, God for the whole world. But for 500 years prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel had been proclaiming that God was God of the whole world. Why another delay?

Surely God chose the earliest realistic opportunity. In any previous century, Jesus would have been, at best, of local interest. News of him might have travelled along a few trade routes, - but with such a hotch potch of languages, communicating it would have been very difficult. And there was so much war and strife: best stay at home.

No, if Christianity could have started any earlier, it would have been a local phenomenon destined to fizzle out like the cults of all those horrendous idols.

But by AD28-29, the stage was well and truly set. The Roman Empire covered the known world – it brought peace, settled conditions, trade, good roads, thorough official record-keeping and, above all, a common language. And so God calls to John the Baptist in the desert and sends him out to prepare the scene for Jesus.

Luke sets the stage. John the Baptist sets the stage. God sets the stage. And us?

What are we doing? Sitting watching the drama unfold? Getting concerned lest some of the actors are in a draught? Wondering

when the action is going to start in a drama which has been running for centuries? Or are we ready to play our part in the drama?

For we are in there. John tells us Isaiah's ancient prophesy. *Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight! Every valley shall be filled up, every mountain and hill shall be made low and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough paths made smooth.* But whoa! Why us? Who says we are involved? Listen to the rest: *All flesh shall see the salvation of God!* We are most certainly involved.

All that business about valleys and hills – it's about removing huge obstacles to the progress of a road. But the road we are building is not built with explosives and earthmovers. It's the road of freedom, of safety (salvation), of discovery, the road we can travel with Christ back to God, and meet God as he travels towards us.

And that road is built with realism -the ability to look at our lives and see what needs improving, tweaking, getting rid of, introducing. It is built with desire – the will to do something about those hiccups to progress. It is built with faith – faith in Jesus Christ and his presence in our lives. It is built with hope – the hope that we can get closer to him and feel his strength and peace grow in our lives day by day. It is built with love: God's love for us and our love for God.

We can build that road. The stage is set. Come on, let's *Prepare the way of the Lord?*