

## Prepare ye the way of the Lord

A Sermon by the Rector

Luke 1:76: “Thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his way.”

Five hundred years before the birth of John the Baptist, Isaiah the prophet was telling the Jewish people: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” They were in exile in Babylon and had begun to think they were abandoned by God, doomed to be slaves for ever. But Isaiah said: No! Change your ways, repent of your sins, return to the worship of God and to living according to his commandments, and he will deliver you; he will restore you to Israel. And this is how the Jews understood their going back from Babylon to Israel.

So when our text in St Luke’s Gospel says that God’s purpose for John Baptist was that he should prepare the way of the Lord, we are meant to understand that his job was to be the same as that of Isaiah. He too was to tell the people of Israel that unless they returned to God and to his way of living he would not help them but would leave them in slavery, this time not to the Babylonians but to the Romans. But he was also to proclaim that if they did turn back to God, he would look after them as a father looks after his children and would free them not only from slavery to the Romans, but also, and much more importantly, he would save them from being slaves to sin.

So – Isaiah said “: Repent, and the Lord will deliver you”, and so he did.

But – John said: “Repent, and the Lord will deliver you” – and what happened? Jesus came, lived thirty-three years and was tortured and put to death. Hardly the deliverance and freedom that was promised.

And then suddenly – the Resurrection, light bursting on the bleak scene, understanding flooding the disciples’ minds. Of course, *now* they could begin to see how the Lord had indeed delivered his people.

He had not given them armies and power to beat the Romans. He could have done, and they would have been free in a sense. But they would still have been selfish, proud, full of hate and jealousy and all the other sins that can make life hell. What kind of freedom is that? No, the Lord gave them no army; instead he gave them the way to true freedom, his perfect example of love, love so strong that even death cannot destroy the person filled with it. That is what the Resurrection is all about. It is not God’s way of covering up a ghastly mistake. No, it is the quite natural fact that for anyone held and possessed by God’s strong love, death has no destroying power.

What Isaiah said to the Israelites in Babylon, and what John Baptist said to the Jews of Jerusalem, it is my duty as a priest of God to say to you today here in Philadelphia: “Prepare the way of the Lord”. We too have the job in our own time to make it possible for the Lord God to get his message of love and forgiveness through to all men. And we too have to start where the disciples started, with repentance, sorrow for our sins which

make us such poor instruments for God to use. A very old and wise prayer says: “O God, convert the world, and begin with me”. And the deep truth of that is that unless we ourselves put our whole life in God’s hands, how can we expect anyone else to do the same?

People came to God through the goodness of Isaiah. People came to God through the goodness and strength of witness of John the Baptist. Has anyone come to know the love of God through you? If not, then listen to St John Baptist – he is speaking to *you*. It is *you* whom God is asking to prepare his way to the hearts of all men - and we all have to start with ourselves.

Look at God’s love for you, and then look at what you are, and be amazed. And having repented, pick yourself up, grab hold of someone else, and for the sheer joy of it, show them Jesus Christ, show them love in action, show them real freedom.

Canon Gordon Reid  
S. Clement’s Church. Philadelphia  
[www.s-clements.org](http://www.s-clements.org)