

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 5 December 2021

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord Amen.

Luke 3:1-6

Prepare the way of the Lord

In today's reading, Luke lists names of seven leaders who are either secular politicians or religious leaders. Indeed they are important people at that time. They are either in charge of big or small regions or religious affairs. Alongside such distinguished company, John is nothing, the son of a small-town priest. He is nowhere, out in the wilderness, where he proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to prepare the way of the Lord. We'll think about John's preaching through the metaphor of constructing a road. Then it will help us understand the theme – prepare the way of the Lord and its message for us today.

There is a saying that *All roads lead to Rome*. We use this idiom when we express that the same outcome can be reached by many methods or ideas. This phrase refers to the road system of the Roman Empire, in which Rome was positioned in the centre, with every road attached to it. Roman's way often took directional straightness when it came to road construction. In general, Roman roads went straight up and down hills rather than in a serpentine pattern of roads. Many long sections are ruler-straight. The Roman emphasis on constructing straight roads resulted in steep slopes, impractical for most commercial traffic. Over the years, the Romans realized this and built longer but more manageable alternatives to existing roads. The reading in Luke regarding preparing the way of the Lord resembles Roman construction in terms of straightness and smooth surface by removing anything to prepare the way.

In Luke 3:1-6, we see twofold harsh straightness. One is that the seven names of politicians and religious figures¹ at the beginning of the reading appear obstacles from preparing the way of the Lord. In the advent of the One, John anticipates that paths will be straightened, valleys filled, mountains low, the crooked straight, and the rough smooth. Indeed all the methods used to make roads to Rome are employed here. But the impact of this proclamation reaches every corner of the world (*kosmos*), which is also the world (*oikoumene: the inhabited (earth)*)

¹ Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas

constituted by the political, economic, and religious powers. John's preaching of repentance threatens those who control the present order because John's preaching will turn people away from the powers and lead them to God. As the story unfolds, John is beheaded by one of the rulers, while Jesus will still later be crucified by another. The other example of straightness is in Isaiah 40:3-4, which John referred to. Isaiah subsequently proclaims that when such things happen, "Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."² It is only when we see the glory of God when our hearts and minds are straightened and smooth by this preparation.

Preparing the Lord's path requires overturning the world as we know it. When Mary is informed by the angel Gabriel about a baby, she will give birth to, and her known world may have overturned as it is the most scandalous thing for a virgin at that time. Yet, Mary receives the message humbly, although she doesn't understand it much. In Mary's song, she praises God, who saves by dethroning the powerful and exalting the humble, sending the rich away empty-handed and filling up the hungry.³

Overturning the world involves all dimensions of life. Jesus blesses the poor, hungry, and weeping but announces woe for the rich and well-fed.⁴ On the Day of Pentecost, Peter warns the people, "Be saved from this crooked generation."⁵ 'Crooked,' *skolia*, is the same word that Isaiah uses for the things that must be straightened out. Preparing for God's arrival means rethinking systems and structures that we see as normal but that God condemns as oppressive and crooked. It means letting God humble everything that is proud and self-satisfied in us and letting God heal and lift up what is broken and beaten down. The claims that the world's authorities make often conflict with God's claims. Paths that seem satisfactory to us are not good enough for God. John calls us to let God's bulldozers reshape the world's social systems and the landscape of our own minds and hearts. God's ways are not our ways.

In our storytime, we heard a simple story of John the Baptist with a question about how we prepare the way of God. In the story, people come to him to be baptized. They ask John how to prepare the way of the Lord. He gives them simple, straightforward solutions. Those who have two coats must share with anyone who has none. Food must be shared likewise. If you

² Isaiah 40:5

³ Luke 1:52-53

⁴ Luke 6:20-26

⁵ Acts 2:40

are politicians, soldiers, merchants or anything else, live and say according to the law of love. We notice that the questions are simple, and so are the answers. Although they may look simple, it is hard to keep them in practice. We will have a special congregational meeting right after the service. Apart from our own agendas, we may have other issues to be concerned about as the world we are living in is changing fast and moving towards an unknown direction. Do you feel overwhelmed or confused? The way of the Lord that we are preparing is not like any other roads and ways. First, we are not able to visualize it as Romans did when they constructed the roads to Rome. Second, unlike Roman roads, which lead us to Rome, the way of the Lord is about God's coming to us. We, small or big, offer us to God to be part of His way. Third, unlike Roman roads and all the roads in the world which reach nowhere, we, the followers of the Way, know what the *telos* is – the goal of this life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.⁶ How simple and beautiful! Preparing the way of the Lord is how the followers of the Way live daily. Indeed, it is good news to share with the whole world. Bring on the bulldozers of the good news. Let's prepare the way. Amen!

⁶ Westminster shorter catechism 1 and 2