

DAY 1 - (week beginning Mon 10 Dec 2018)**Read - Isaiah 40:1-11**

"A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." v 3

My wife hates surprises – surprise parties or visits. Our whole family is under strict instructions not to arrange any surprises. It's not the shock of the surprise that is an issue; it's the missing out on the anticipation of the event.

She so enjoys looking forward to people coming to visit, or a function like a party, that she feels that so much enjoyment is missed when it is a surprise.

God, it seems, felt the same way about the coming of Jesus to earth. It was something that needed to be anticipated so that people could get excited about it. In fact this passage from Isaiah kept the Jewish people excited for many centuries as they anticipated the coming of their Messiah.

I think my wife has a good point – there is much life and joy and enthusiasm to be gained in the anticipation of good things to come. This is why every year we set aside advent and lent to spend time anticipating the work that God does in our lives – His demonstration of His love and intent with the birth of Jesus, and the realisation of our salvation in the cross and resurrection.

The shops sure get excited every Christmas (which now seems to start in October), and so should we, but for very different reasons. It is a reminder of just how much God loves us – nothing is more exciting than that.

Prayer: Father help me to get excited again about Your love for me.

DAY 2**Read - Matt 3:1-12**

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire". v 11

I'm a keen birder and it always interests me how differently we see things when we are expecting to see something. When we go to Kruger Park, every yellow rock looks like a lion and when we go birding every lump in a tree looks like a rare bird.

But also the route we take looking for birds looks different. We may travel familiar roads but suddenly we notice a clump of trees over there or a small patch of water over here – all having good birding potential. We never noticed those before, but now we are actively looking for signs.

John was the forerunner that Isaiah spoke about and Jews who knew their beliefs would have recognised that John was preparing the way.

But John also knew his purpose and so he actively pointed people to the One who was to come. He was not the main show, he was merely the forerunner (the advert) for the real thing, Jesus.

His job was to build up people's excitement and anticipation and to open their eyes to actively look for the Saviour who was to come. They needed to not look at things the way they normally did, but to consciously look for what they were expecting to see.

We need to approach this Advent in the same way – what are we expecting to see this Christmas?

Think: What are you expecting from God?

DAY 3**Read - Luke 1:26-56**

"The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." v 30-32

Something very strange was going to happen to Mary and she needed to be prepared for it. She was going to become pregnant even though she was a virgin! This is the sort of surprise that no-one wants to have.

God needed Mary to be able to understand a little bit of what was going on. She probably could not have understood the whole story, like the crucifixion and resurrection, but she needed to understand the first part.

A little bit of understanding helps us to be ready for what is to come. Much like the trailer for a new film – it helps you get an idea of what the film is about, but does not tell you everything.

In Mary's case, it changed her reaction from confusion to one of understanding how blessed she was – as we see in her prayer at the end of the passage.

We are in the fortunate position that we know the full story; we understand just how amazing God's love is for us, not just in sending Jesus, but in Him dying for my sin and rising again to give me true life. We should always get excited about Christmas because we are a big part of the story: God loves me!

Prayer: Thank You Lord for Your amazing love for little old me.

DAY 4**Read - Luke 3:1-19**

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." v 10-11

We have a small cottage in our garden that used to be a granny flat for my parents-in-law. It is now used to house people who come to visit us.

We have a couple coming in the next few days so we are busy preparing it for their arrival. If they just arrived without any warning we would be in quite a state, and would have to distract them for a while so that we could get it ready.

The forerunner who comes, tells us what is going to happen so that we can be ready for His arrival. John the Baptist told the people that the Saviour was coming and they wanted to know what they should do – how they could prepare.

So too, as we approach Christmas, advent gives us time to prepare. But what do we prepare.

In our modern times, Christmas is so commercialised and busy with holidays and parties that we often react afterwards with "Thank goodness Christmas is over!"

We should be preparing so that we get Christ back into Christmas and it becomes a spiritual time; a time when we feel God's blessing and love above all else.

It will take some preparation beforehand, but that is why there is a forerunner. Nowadays we can't miss that it is Christmas, but we can still miss the point.

Prayer: Lord, please help me plan for You.

DAY 5**Read - Isaiah 53:1-6**

"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." v 6

My wife and daughter like the Marvel Avengers movies and so, once they get the advance notice (forerunner) of the next movie, they get out the previous few movies so that they can remind themselves what happened before. They want to be ready for what is to come; to get into the new story quickly and not be confused.

Our advent time is also a time for us to prepare for what God has new to say to us. In order to do that, we need to go back to what has happened before so that we can hit the ground running when God speaks.

It is a time for us to think back over the year; see what God has been doing; see what we have or haven't been doing; so that we are ready for what God has to say to us this year.

It is a time for us to honestly and openly assess where we are going in this world. Is our relationship with God helping us to deal with the issues we face in our daily life, or is our life crowding out our relationship with God?

When we look back at the previous episodes in our life, it helps us to understand the one we are in a bit better. If we don't look back, the present can seem rather confusing.

But no matter how we got here, we don't have to stay here.

Think: How has your relationship with God grown during this year?

DAY 6**Read - Isaiah 40:1-11**

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." v 1-2

But the main message of the forerunner, is one of comfort. It is a message of hope and holds the promise of real life.

Life is tough and many of us have had a very difficult year for a variety of reasons. The forerunner comes to tell us of the good news of what is to come!

It is something that we should anticipate with great excitement, but also something we should plan to be ready for. It is something we can miss if we are not properly prepared.

God has great things in store to bring life and light to our lives. As we said a few weeks ago, we have the option to "Choose life" [Deut 30:19], but that option may pass us by unnoticed if we are not ready.

We can't afford to let God's offer of a transforming friendship go unaccepted because we are too busy with life to see the source of real life. "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." [John 10:10]

The forerunner has come so that we can be prepared, ready to see and hear God, through Jesus, and remembering His birth as the beginning of the revelation of God's love.

Prayer: Father, please help me to experience anew Your wondrous love and the life that You offer me here and now. Thank You.