



Date: 10th & 17th December 2023

Theme: **Preparing the Way**

Bible Reading: **Mark 1:1-8**

Contributor: *Ruth Fitch*

Edited by Andy Murphy and Mel Wheeler

PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

Please remember to contact your group beforehand to remind them of the date, time and venue. As *this may be your last session before Christmas, what can you prepare to make it extra special?* Make sure you have read the material and are familiar with the passages. Paper and pens will be useful.

PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

If you have a Bible at home (or online), please read the Bible passage from **Mark 1: verses 1-8**. This is the set Gospel reading for Advent 2. For further reading, you might also like to read the Gospel passage for the following week: **John 1: verses 6-8 and 19-28**.

Reflect on the following questions:

What do you think of John the Baptist and his role in the story, and our worship during Advent?

What does 'preparing' mean for you in the lead-up to Christmas?

Think about a time when you have felt 'unprepared', even though you knew something was coming.

Have you ever looked back at a time of growth or adversity and felt that God was somehow preparing you for something?

STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS

In small groups of 3-5 people:

Share your thoughts about John the Baptist, and 'being prepared'.

Do your Christmas preparations help you to feel prepared to meet with or worship God? Or does the opposite feel true for you? What is most important in your Christmas preparations in your faith-life?

A PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ,
When there seems to be no end in sight to the conflict and violence in our time,
teach us how to prepare the way;
Where we can see no way to provide for the needs of all people,
show us how to prepare the way;
When we can find no way to work together for justice,
change us until we prepare the way;
Where we are unable to live simply, responsibly and mindfully,
inspire us to faith in your way;
In a world where we are tempted to despair or see our challenges as dead-ends,
give us new vision, we pray; a new heart and a new commitment
to prepare the way for your reign, your grace, your joy.
Your kingdom come, with liberation, justice and peace;
Prepare your way in us today. Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURES

Read together the Bible passage: **Mark 1:1-8**

Background Information: Mark's Gospel is perfect for the time of Advent, but less so for Christmas, as it does not contain a story of Jesus' birth. Mark begins his gospel by looking both backwards and forwards. He focuses on the person of John the Baptist, the Voice in the wilderness, echoing the words and promises of Isaiah from centuries before and looking forward to the imminent coming of Christ. In his appearance, John the Baptist is described like Elijah or other prophets. Traditionally, on the 2nd Sunday of Advent the church thinks about the prophets. Even in Mark's fast-paced gospel, the sense of waiting, of anticipation and of hope can be strongly felt. It comes at a time of crisis for God's people, when many felt the need for a new era – 'the forgiveness of sins' – and an end to their spiritual exile. It may be very helpful to read **Isaiah chapter 40** alongside this passage.

John 1: 6-8, 19-28 (for Advent 3) also focuses on John the Baptist, who is faced with some searching questions from the religious authorities as to who he thinks he is and what it is that he's doing. Both John the Baptist and Jesus worked in similar ways, setting a pattern for all their disciples to follow (remember that some of John's disciples later became followers of Jesus). This of course, includes us.

DIGGING DEEPER

Imagine you are a 1st-Century Jewish person who has never heard of Jesus, but longs for the promised Messiah and the arrival ('advent') of God's kingdom. What do you do you think you would feel about John the Baptist's words and ministry? What would baptism mean to you?

Is it significant what John wore and ate? How important can it be sometimes to be 'counter-cultural'?

What are the similarities between Isaiah (ch.40), John the Baptist, and Jesus?

How might we be able to find a bit of time in the 'wilderness' (to get away from it all)? This was clearly important to both John and Jesus. What would you hope to find in a time of retreat?

What could John mean when he talks about baptism 'with the Holy Spirit'?

John speaks of not being worthy to untie the thongs of Jesus' sandals (Mark 1:7 and John 1:27). What do you think this means? And whose 'sandals' must we (as disciples of Jesus) be willing to untie?

What does it mean to be a voice preparing the way of the Lord?

How do we testify to God among us? If we are the body of Christ, then are we not also the 'Word become flesh'? Can we see and proclaim the presence of God in one another?

What are the dangers of seeing ourselves as individuals as God's 'Word' or 'Light' to the world? How does being called as 'one Body' together help us to get things in perspective?

ACTIVITY – CHRISTMAS LIST

Preparing for Christmas, with all of the demands and expectations of the season, can be difficult for some (especially if your experience has not always been joyful). In groups of 2 or 3, if you feel comfortable, talk through your hopes or anxieties together. Each of you try to make a list of just three things that will make Christmas special or bearable for you. **What are your three priorities for Christmas?** Take the list home and try to keep these things at the forefront of your mind in your preparations. Staying focussed on a few things can give a sense of achievement, while trying to do too much could lead to an unreasonable sense of failure. Show yourself a bit of the grace we proclaim!

PRAYING TOGETHER

- Pray for those for whom Christmas this year will be difficult, stressful or mournful;
- Pray for our churches and other Christian organisations as we proclaim the Light of the World;
- Pray for peace in the world, and for that grace and understanding to begin among us.
- Say **the Lord's Prayer** together.