

hope much more clearly. We are not just forgiven, but born anew, born of the Spirit (Jn 3.3,5). God's "tender mercy" – his grace – enables us to change, to become new people.

Reflect:

- When we compare John and Jesus, we see differences in their manner and message. What were some of these differences?
- John Wesley believed it was necessary to preach law before you could preach grace. Why might this be so?

Are we ready?

No, it isn't a question of whether we have our tree and decorations up, whether all our Christmas greetings have been posted, whether we've bought all our presents, whether we have chosen our Christmas menu, or decided on our Christmas guest list!

Are we ready for the Lord? He came for us – have we thanked him for coming? He lived and died for us – have we repented of our sin and received his forgiveness? He came alive again for us – have we acknowledged him as our Saviour and Lord? One day he's coming again – to sum up everything at the end of human history.

Are we ready for the Lord?

Now is the time! Repent and believe the good news! Then live it - by his grace and in the power of his Spirit!

Reflect:

- We began by thinking about getting ready for Christmas. What can we do this Christmas to begin getting ready for the Lord himself?
- Many times the Scriptures remind us that Jesus is coming again. How can we prepare ourselves for his second coming?

Study 4: Glory to God! Bible reading: Luke 2.1-20

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Four Studies for Advent
by Peter J Blackburn

3. The Lord is Coming!

Reading: Luke 1.67-80

A few years ago, an US President was going to visit the Australian Government in Canberra. He was on his way to Singapore and Tokyo. The visit was preceded by a substantial advance party. A thorough security check was carried out on all buildings and precincts he would visit – and on any neighbouring buildings and precincts.

Throughout the whole visit the same careful security was evident. One of our sons was in Canberra at the time. By Australian standards the precautions seemed extraordinary. It isn't a question of what we think of particular US Presidents, or of US policy. With the international status of the USA, the safety of the US President could have ramifications for world peace.

For Thanksgiving Day 2003, elaborate plans were made to indicate where President Bush would be celebrating the day at home – including what would be on the menu.

Meantime, with a small group of aides, all sworn to secrecy, he boarded the presidential plane and flew to Iraq, landing at Baghdad airport under cover of darkness. The US Administrator of Iraq told gathered troops that he had a Thanksgiving Day message for them from the President. Then he looked towards the stage and said, "Let's see if we've got anyone more senior here". That's when the President emerged. He told the troops he was "just looking for a warm meal somewhere. Thank you for inviting me to dinner".

Two-and-a-half hours later, under similar secrecy, the plane took off again for home. Only when it was well on its way was the news released to the media.

Reflect:

- Getting ready – the family can come this afternoon if they like; we'd need longer to be ready for someone "important"; as for the Queen? Why does it take us longer to be ready for some people than for others?
- Getting for Christmas – cards, presents, hospitality, meals... But it's Christ's birthday we celebrate. How do we get ready for Christ?

Someone Greater is Coming!

Read: Luke 1.67-80

But – someone greater than the United States President was coming!

Zechariah and Elizabeth, a couple who thought of themselves as “old” and “well along in years” (Lk. 1.18), had just had a baby boy whom they named “John” (v. 60). The angel had announced beforehand that the child would have a special divine destiny – “he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (v. 17).

That’s it – “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”. Zechariah and Elizabeth knew that someone greater than their son John was coming soon!

Elizabeth’s cousin Mary had been with them for the past three months. Mary was having a baby in six months’ time. When she arrived, Elizabeth had greeted her as “the mother of my Lord” (v. 33).

John has important work to do, but someone greater is coming. And now, Zechariah, who hasn’t said a word for the past nine months, is able to speak again. He praises the Lord and speaks out about the Lord’s plans for his son John –

“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” (vv. 76-79).

The Lord is coming and John is to prepare the way for his arrival. The rising sun will come from heaven. John the Baptist, as we call him, saw himself fulfilling Isaiah 40.3 – “A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.’” (as in Jn 1.19ff)

Reflect:

- Second fiddle? Trumpet herald? The role of all the prophets was secondary. What would be the special task of John?

Prepare the Way

Prepare? How could John “prepare the way for the Lord”? What could he tell the Jewish people that would “prepare the way for the Lord”? How can he “give [God’s] people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins” (Lk. 1.77)?

We hear that John “went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (3.3).

“Repent” means to turn back. It is to recognise that something is seriously wrong about our manner of life. It is to acknowledge that we are sinners. It is to turn away from that self-seeking, self-pleasing, self-exalting – and self-destructive – lifestyle. For all who truly repent, God offers forgiveness, salvation – release from all the nasty eternal consequences of our sin.

The children’s song warns that Santa Claus is coming to town – you’d better watch out because he will find out who’s naughty or nice! That’s a fun song to sing. But we’re not talking about Santa here! Sin is far more serious than whether you’re “naughty or nice”. It affects and infects every one of us – young and old. Unlike Santa, the Lord already knows all about us. And his call is for all of our life – not just for Christmas time!

That’s why the call to repent means more than a temporary cosmetic adjustment! John is very direct with his hearers – “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (v. 8a). Repentance means turning from an old way of living to a new way. It isn’t repentance if we say and do the same sort of things we said and did before.

Reflect:

- Compare repentance with our preparations for an important guest. What if this person is to become a permanent guest?

Now all of that can be very discouraging. It sounds as if people have to “pull up their socks”. But, severe as John’s words sound, they are to be understood under “the tender mercy of God”.

John was the last of the “old-style” prophets. Jesus is “the rising sun from heaven”. In Jesus the message of God’s tender mercy comes through much more clearly.

The angel told Joseph, “[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1.21). That was his mission. His call to repentance and change brings salvation and