

Preparing the Way

Luk 3:1-16 Phil 1:1-11 (Luk 1:68-79) Mal 3:1-14

+ At the beginning of our planning meeting I presented the findings that only 3 percent of all people have goals and plans and write them down.

Ten percent more have goals and plans, but keep them in their heads.

The rest -- 87 percent -- drift through life without definite goals or plans.

They do not know where they are going and others dictate to them.

When you examine these statistics further you see that...

The 3 percent who have goals and plans that are written down accomplish from **fifty to one hundred times more** during their life than the 10 percent who have goals and plans and merely keep them in their heads.

Those figures alone should encourage in this Advent period, to be people who prepare for the future.

Despite the 87 percent who drift through life, we all tend to make preparations of some sort...

We prepare for holidays, weddings and birthdays. Many of you here today will already know what you are going to do on Christmas Day. We prepare for disasters by taking out insurances. I daresay that a much of the recent changes in politics are fundamentally a preparation for the next elections at federal and state levels.

These events which have filled our news reports highlight the fact that **as we look to the future it can radically change what we do in the present!**

+ At a more mundane level. Susan and I stayed in a B & B at Grafton on Friday night. We didn't unpack the suitcase because we were only too well aware that we would be moving out the next morning.

It's a similar thing when you rent a house, you don't do much that can't take with you.

We know not to become too attached or settled in to situations we know are only temporary

NOW

One of the most important realisations in life is that this world we live in, is not an end in itself, but a preparation for the next. Our stay here is only temporary.

And when that really sinks in, it ought to radically change the way we live!

As the Jewish people looked forward to a Messiah coming into the world, it was with the expectation that everything would change...

Isa 11

⁶ *The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

⁷ *The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

⁸ *The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*

⁹ *They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

Such a radical change required a change of attitude.

+ If the weather bureau puts out a storm warning, and you believe them, you don't go out and leave the windows open and the washing on the line

If you believe that change is coming, you prepare for it.
You heed the warnings and you make changes now!

The job of the prophets was like the weather bureau.
They told you to prepare for the storm,
and also encouraged people to know that the storm would eventually pass over.

According to Jesus John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets because he heralded the greatest change in history – the coming of Jesus on the scene as the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world.

“Get ready! Prepare the way,” he called out.
Change your attitude – ie REPENT.

Now, just as many Jewish people were looking for and preparing for Jesus' first coming into the world, so we are to prepare for the second.

Our lives are to be focussed on that event, not so that we wish our lives away but so that we live life to the fullest now in the light of what is to come.

In other words, what we do now will be worthwhile because it will also count in eternity.

+ When I used to travel by train, as we neared my destination, I would find it difficult to settle into reading because I didn't want to miss my stop. My mind was preoccupied with where I was going.

As we approach eternity, God wants us to be preoccupied with where we are going.

It doesn't mean that we never read a book or watch a film, or appreciate a day on the beach, or whatever you do to relax...

...it does mean however that you do these things in the light of eternity. That you appreciate them as gifts from God, and you evaluate them in the light of his word.

+As I travel often I am reading a book or magazine, but every so often you will look up to see where I am and where I am going.
So it is for the Christian.

Paul wrote to the **Philippians** about the purpose of their lives, in the light of eternity.

We know that eventually we will be made perfect before God.
But we are not simply to sit on our hands waiting for God to suddenly zap us with righteousness.

The Bible constantly talks about God refining people *in this life*, as well as on the Day of Judgement.

400 years before Christ Malachi warned the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from the Exile ...

(Chapter 3)

Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

²*But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.*
³*He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver;*

We ourselves are to be ready for Christ's return.
He has given us his Spirit to help us to work towards that goal
(even though we know we will not achieve it perfectly in this life)

So Paul writes to the Philippians (chap 1):-

⁶*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*

⁹*And this is my prayer,
that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight*

I suggest knowledge and full insight come mostly through prayer and reading the Scriptures --- We need to be in small groups to study and learn

But knowledge and insight are not ends in themselves.
Studying the Bible on your own or in groups must have an aim beyond simply knowing a lot of Scripture.

Paul goes on to present the aim of his prayer for full knowledge and insight...

¹⁰*to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*

John the Baptist went on to talk about, not just the change of attitude but also the *change of behaviour* to go with the new attitude.

People asked him, "What should we do?"
"What is the appropriate behaviour for the Kingdom of the Messiah?" and John gives them very practical advice...

"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise

Share your excess clothing and food

+ Mary Jesuthasen (one of our previous link-missionaries with CMS) when she returned from Tanzania looked in her wardrobe and realised that she had far more than she needed.

Two other link missionaries, Dick and Michelle Ferguson, managed their ten years with just a change or two of clothes at any one time.

We are so rich, compared to most of the world.

God's people are to share so that others do not go short

¹²*Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."*

In other words...

Be honest and fair in all your dealings

¹⁴*Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."*

Be satisfied, not greedy

I'm sure that John wasn't handing down a comprehensive list here. What he seems to be saying is, "It is in the everyday things of life that you show yourselves to be God's people – or not."

I presume that extortion and dissatisfaction were common amongst the Roman soldiers (And isn't it interesting that they saw something in what John was saying!). John says to them, "Don't behave like every other soldier. Show that you are different!"

Malachi added another application...

Don't rob God

Give your full tithes and offerings

I'm sure this means more than money, but it at least includes our money.

So is there any difference between the way you behave and the way the world behaves?

In the USA, some years ago, they found the most common unethical or illegal practices were...

- Cutting corners on quality control
- Covering up incidents
- Abusing or lying about sick days
- Lying to or deceiving customers
- Putting inappropriate pressure on others.

It's not just how you are on Sunday, when others are watching, but every day of the week *in the ordinary things* that your behaviour and attitude makes a difference

So is your language, your attitude, your giving reflecting the fact that your whole life, all that you are and all that you hope to be, belongs to God ?

Someone once asked the question, "If you were put on trial for being a Christian. Would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

+ When I look at what it takes to be holy and blameless, and I look at my own life, I have to confess that I have a long way to go. It would be easy at times to throw up my hands and say, "It's too much. I'll settle for not-too-bad" and wait for God to do the rest and make me completely right.

But the message today is that we are not to give up the struggle for holiness.

One of God's great purposes for us is to purify us...

We are to be people of integrity

We are to grow more and more into the character of Jesus.

The struggle to achieve this,

in God's strength,

and with the support of other Christians

is what helps to produce endurance and character within us.

Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi

⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

The day is coming.

Let us prepare.

Let us be ready.