

Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

I don't know about you, but when we are expecting guests to come to our house, that's the time when we break out the vacuum cleaner and tidy up the piles of junk that have sat on the counter for the past 3 weeks. There's a slight panic that results in the house suddenly looking uncharacteristically clean, and while we know it won't last, it's quite pleasing for a day or two. Perhaps there is someone who precipitates an even deeper clean than usual, someone who merits that extra bit of work. Perhaps there is even some dusting that happens, or the bedding in the spare room gets changed.

John the Baptist has the feel of someone unexpectedly knocking at your door and saying 'the president is on his way to your house for coffee. Quick, get ready!' Imagine the stunned flurry of cleaning that would initiate!

This is what Advent brings to us. We often talk a lot about Advent being a time of waiting, and it is, but it's more than that. Advent is a time to get ready, and getting ready is not a passive thing - it's active, it's busy, it's focussed and urgent! Advent is like running around with your Lysol wipes just in case the president looks in that back corner of the kitchen cupboard. Advent is that chance to look around with fresh eyes and think, 'what will they see?', or 'what do I *want* them to see?'. Along with Lent, it is one of the penitential seasons of the Church year. We have these weeks for reflection and preparation before the big event. Christmas and Easter are so significant that we can't properly experience them without some active getting ready, so this is the purpose of Advent.

So the president is coming to your house for coffee. How much are you panicking?! Except actually it's even worse; it's God. God is coming to stay, and you have to get ready. "Prepare the way of the Lord!" cries John, ringing on your doorbell wildly. Time for some serious deep cleaning and reevaluation!

Our spiritual reflection question for this month, which was unveiled last Sunday, is particularly relevant here. This month we ask ourselves: what new ways of being church should we be open to? This question invites some of this active reflection, a sort of spiritual deep cleaning, that Advent asks us to participate in.

So on that theme, let me ask you another question. Why do we do church? I'm not asking for the reasons behind why exactly we do the specific things we do - I don't expect an explanation of the development of the colours of the Church year! But I wonder why you think we do church at all. What is the point? What does it achieve? You all may have some different answers as to why we do church - we do church in order to worship, to have community, to celebrate and receive the eucharist [to remember Jesus], to be a witness, to glorify God, to be formed as Christians... The list goes on.

But I would suggest to you this morning that in summary, we do church because God is coming. Because we live in a not-yet time, looking forward to being united with God. Doing church is like cleaning, preparing, getting ourselves ready. Week after week we come to worship, to confess, to be forgiven, to remember Jesus, to eat and pray and be a family together. We do all this to be in continual active preparation. We do it because we aren't the finished product until we are fully united with God. So we're always in this mode of getting ready, it's just that Advent highlights it and asks us to focus on it.

Advent reminds us that we're always on this quest to be our best selves. When we have guests come over, there is a desire to present our best selves. We remind children to be polite, we remember our manners and wear something nice. When God is coming among

us, we should have a similar desire to BE our best selves. Now I'm not saying that we put on a front, or try to come across holier than we are, but instead it's some of that active preparation. We want to actually *become* the best we can be. We want to confront and deal with the things that aren't so great, so that instead we can joyfully live into being people of God. This is what it means in our post communion prayer where we say, 'send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord'. We are asking to become more and more the faithful bearer of Christ, more and more the person who reflects God into the world as we go out and about our daily business.

For here is a thought: Christ is coming, but we are the hands and feet and voices of Christ in the world. So what does it mean that Christ is coming? What if we thought of it as Christ coming *through us*?! What if John the Baptist was proclaiming that *you* were on the way, and that you were bringing God. Imagine, John is hanging on the doorbell, shouting excitedly that the Lord is near, but the person who turns up is you... You are the bearer of Christ.

Now this might feel daunting. But you don't have to know the books of the bible in order. You don't have to have studied theology. You don't need experience as a teacher. You don't even need to feel confident! Simply having a faith of your own is enough. For we are all priests in this way. We are all spiritual experiencers. We all have wisdom to offer, even if it might not feel like it at times. We can all offer connection and reflection. I've often felt 'I don't have anything to add. Someone else will say it better. There's no need for me to contribute.' But this misses the point! We each have value and worth. Every person here, even you, regardless of your background or experience, has the potential to build connections, reflect the divine, and add to the beauty of God's kingdom.

So it is Advent once again, and we are waiting, preparing, getting ready, once again. But this year, as John the Baptist exclaims that Christ is coming, I invite you to imagine that it is you carrying the gift of the coming Jesus. He will come into the world again, through you. Because of this incredible gift and responsibility, we must be active in our preparation, active in trying to become the best selves we can be, for that is how the incarnation of God made flesh happens in our time, here and now. We have gathered this morning to do church together once again, but when you leave this place, go out to love and serve as faithful witnesses, for you are the bearers of the Advent promise.

Amen.