

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 9th December 2018

Luke 3: 1 - 6

Is it now the right time to ask the question, are you prepared – are we prepared - for Brexit? What it means to be prepared for Brexit might become a bit clearer this coming week when the UK Parliament votes on whether to accept the UK Government's preparations for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union three months from now.

March marks a deadline for the UK to leave the EU, and the UK Government has prepared a plan, an agreement with the EU to clear a straight path to that deadline; to fill in the ravines of difficulty that leaving the EU opens up; to level the mountains of complexity that leaving the EU has built up; to straighten the corners of disruption that might transpire; and to make smooth the rugged ways of trouble that all this has caused, so that the Government's policy of delivering citizens of the UK out of the European Union might be implemented.

Over the past weeks since it has agreed its plan with the EU to prepare for the advent of Brexit, the Government with a loud voice has been crying out hoping to persuade people to listen to its message of deliverance.

That is what the UK Government has been doing with regard to Brexit, but with less than three months to go, I want to ask if you have been doing anything to prepare for the advent of Brexit?

Someone wrote about Brexit recently,

My wife has just switched the news off exclaiming "this is too complicated" and resumed writing her aeronautical engineering thesis on 'Improving the Performance of Thermoplastic Composite Structural Joints'.

It's just too complicated, so let's leave it to those who walk the corridors of power in Westminster, Brussels, Holyrood, and whose responsibility it is to prepare us and to straighten the paths, fill in ravines, level the mountains, straighten the corners, smooth the rugged ways. They are the ones elected to sort this out, they hold the power to do so, they are in charge, and they lead, so let's leave it to them. What can we do to prepare ourselves for Brexit?

Brexit isn't of course the first political or social, crisis that people have faced where the powerful bear responsibility for leadership. In both the Gospel reading this morning and the Old Testament reading this morning we hear voices proclaiming in a time of crisis.

The prophet Malachi proclaimed, 'You have wearied the Lord with your talk.' If that doesn't resonate with the Brexit debate, then I can't imagine what does. The rest of Malachi's proclamation suggests that his community faced a crisis of justice in which those who held the weakest places in his society – widows, hired labour, orphans - were being particularly maltreated while those with questionable morals - sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers were being treated favourably. That was Malachi's proclamation in a time of crisis.

In Luke's Gospel we read that John the Baptist was proclaiming a deliverance for all mankind – a sure sign that there was something back then that people needed delivered from. What is significant about both the prophet Malachi and Luke in their proclamations about what to do in a time of crisis, is that they both focus on those who held positions of power and leadership.

Malachi imagines a messenger will come to the temple, the seat of religious power, to deliver a message of liberation. After his story of Jesus' birth, Luke begins his Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, the part we read today, by focusing very tightly on those people who held power. He tells his readers first and foremost who led the Empire at the time – it was Tiberias; who was governor of the province at the time – Pontius Pilate; which princes reigned in the local regions at the time – Herod and his brother Philip, and who were the high priests of the temple at the time – Annas and Caiaphas.

Having established who was in charge we might imagine that Luke would then tell us a story that involved these people in some way in his good news of liberation. After all, he has made clear who it was who held power when deliverance arrived. But, that is not what he does in his story.

Immediately after telling us in great detail about the palaces and the temples, the empire of Rome, and the people who held power in these places, Luke takes us to a place that was on the very margin of the empire, far from the towns of Galilee, far below – literally - the temple on a high hill in Jerusalem. He takes us to the wilderness, the desert, in the hot, dry, below-sea-level Jordan valley. There, he introduces us to some bloke called John who had no position, status, or power.

It is there, out of the mouth of an unknown person, in the wilderness, on the margin of the empire, far from the temple, on the edge of the world, in a rough, dry, poor place, that the revolutionary message of liberation finds a voice.

If you want to know what is happening in the world, what is driving history, Luke is saying, don't bother going to the seat of power and listening to what the wealthy, powerful people have to say in their magnificent buildings. Instead, go to the margins of your world, the wilderness places of your society, and listen to the voices of the ordinary people there.

How might you prepare for Brexit? Where might you go to prepare – to listen to the voices of those on the edge of our society? Amidst the din of political debate in the corridors of power there are two places you could go, that is to say, two books you could read this Advent that give voice to the sort of people in the sort of places that Luke is pointing us towards.

You could read *Poverty Safari*, which won the George Orwell prize for best political writing this year. Written by Darren McGarvey, he tells his own story of growing up poor and marginalised in Pollock in Glasgow. Or you could read a similar book from the other side of the Atlantic called *Hillbilly Elegy*, which is a memoir of a family and a culture in crisis, written by J. D. Vance about his experience of growing up poor and marginalised in a place called Middletown, Ohio.

Both these books are voices in the wilderness calling out for the lives of people who live there to be straightened; the ravines that they must cross daily just to get by to be filled in; the mountains that they must scale to get out of their poverty levelled; corners that crop up unexpectedly around which they must somehow turn to be straightened; and the rugged ways of life in the poorest communities of society to be made smooth.

Three things stand out in both these books, in both these voices from the margins of society. One is the extent to which those who are wealthy, who live in the prosperous places and hold power need to hear the voices from the margins if societies are ever to become not just more equal, but for millions of people in our country and in the USA, places that are liveable in with any sense of dignity and opportunity.

Both these books make clear how and why it is the failings of those who are prosperous and hold power to listen to the voices from the margins that has led to the political crisis that is Brexit, and the political anomaly that is Donald Trump.

Most importantly, though both these books highlight the extent to which the people who live in the wilderness places of our society need to be given the opportunities to find the capacity within themselves to change their own circumstances. If you can't rely on the political and middle classes to change your life circumstances for the better, then you need the resources to start changing those circumstances for yourself.

That call to changing life's circumstances ourselves might equally be applied to anyone who feels confused or worried about Brexit. If you don't think the country's political leadership is doing a good job with Brexit, and if you feel like you are standing in a wilderness of confusion and fear when it comes to Brexit, well then, what are you going to do about that, might be the lesson from our readings this morning?

But, this is bad timing. For who has the time in the run-up to Christmas to start educating themselves politically. There is just so much preparation to be done for Christmas; so many paths to be straightened to get to that day; so many family ravines that need filled in lest we fall in to them; so many mountains of presents to be bought; so many unexpected corners to be turned; a rugged way needs smoothing like every year, and that takes time and preparation.

Who has the time this Christmas to listen to the voice from the margin? Who has the time to listen to a message from the most remote of places? Who has the time to listen to a cry from a manger? Who has the time to reflect on what an event 2,000 years ago in a small town in a foreign country 5,000 miles away has to say to us today? Who has the time to wonder at the significance of an unlikely event that involves an odd cast of characters and a heavenly vision?

Who has the time to do any of that when what exerts the most power in our lives at this time of year; when what walks up and down the corridors of power in our minds at this time of year; when what exerts the most force on our wealth - what to spend and how much to spend - at this time of year; when what lies heaviest in our stomachs at this time of year - how much we have eaten and drunk; are the preparations that we make for Christmas Day.

Who has the time to listen to the story that has been pushed to the margin of our Christmas festivities, and to wonder what significance that story might have for our lives: not to the lives of others or to the lives of the rich and powerful or to the lives of the priests and the ministers or to the life of the church, but to how we take responsibility ourselves for leading our individual lives?

Who has the time to prepare for what is coming by going and listening to him whose story has been pushed to the margin of our world, and to ask themselves what does this mean for me? What does this mean for the world that I live in and the people I live with?