

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen

When you are transporting an oversized load from one place to another down the road there are strict guidelines and rules that must be followed. According to the Heavy Vehicle National Law that's quoted on the Service SA website "Pilot and escort vehicles are essential in preserving road safety when large oversize loads are moved on the road. Pilot vehicles with appropriate signage provide advance warning to approaching traffic." Signs often say "oversize load" or "wide load" and they warn us that something much larger, greater and impressive is heading our way. John the Baptist served a similar purpose. He didn't have the means to make posters and signs in the wilderness, but he was very successful in spreading the word that someone greater and more powerful than him was coming, someone who would baptise with the Holy Spirit instead of water. Perhaps next time you are travelling on a road and see an "oversize load" sign you can remember John the Baptist and be thankful for the part he played in preparing the way for Jesus. He had a vital part in making the people ready to receive Jesus. He created an air of anticipation and told the people that the much longed for Messiah was imminent.

In this second week of Advent we are focussing on John the Baptist and his message because he was the forerunner to the major event, the prequel to the main story and the scene setter for the drama that was to unfold. There was some confusion about who or what he was. Some thought he was a prophet and some thought that he was the Messiah, but he quickly convinced them that he was not the Messiah and someone much greater than him was still to come. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus we are also in a time of waiting for a much anticipated event. We have a lot in common with the Jews who were waiting for their much hoped for and expected Messiah.

When we anticipate things we are filled with the hope and joy for what is to come, no matter what it actually is. My Great Aunt would never unwrap her Christmas presents if they were delivered a few days before Christmas and she always used to say that the anticipation of what might be inside them was all a part of the pleasure of having presents. Unfortunately one of our children, when they were quite small, couldn't understand that Auntie Beattie didn't immediately want to see what was inside her gift as soon as it was given and blurted out, "well it's just some jam anyway!". Luckily for us, Auntie Beattie was a bit hard of hearing!

Our lives are filled with times of anticipation and expectation. Some of these times are large events, like starting in a new position, moving into a new house or collecting a new pet for the first time, but some are only small things, like looking forward to trying a new restaurant or going to see a highly rated movie. We wonder what the new situation will be like, and can be apprehensive of what might happen when the time of anticipation is over and the awaited moment finally arrives. It is in these moments of uncertainty that we need to remember, sometimes with the prompting of a "John the Baptist-like person", that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are always with us, guiding, enriching and blessing us with many wonderful experiences. John the Baptist told people to repent in preparation of Jesus' coming and this must have brought them both comfort and reassurance that something great was about to happen.

When John the Baptist started to preach from the wilderness area near the River Jordan, there had been no prophets for at least three hundred years. The Jewish people were hungry to hear the word of God and flocked in large numbers to hear what John had to say. Some had assumed that he was a prophet, and many of them thought that he was Elijah, because he dressed like Elijah in camel's hair

with a leather belt and ate a very simple diet of locusts and wild honey. He had lived for some years in the desolate silence of wild areas listening to the voice of God, without the busyness or noise of a village or town community to interfere with the messages that God wanted him to hear and pass on to the Jews.

So often in our lives the background noise of the people we live, work or play with and the places that we occupy are so noisy that they drown out any chance for us to listen for God's voice. Many of the young (and possibly not so young people) that I see in my workplace, on the streets or at home are constantly filling their minds and headspace with music or stories or messages and there is no space for silence. Many are dependent on this background noise and are unable to switch off their phones or other devices and listen and reflect independently and silently, let alone hear what God is trying to tell them.

Mahatma Gandhi was a great appreciator of the value of silence. He said

“Silence has now become both a physical and spiritual necessity for me. Originally it was taken to relieve the sense of pressure... After, however, I had practised it for some time, I saw the spiritual value of it. It suddenly flashed across my mind that that was the time when I could best hold communion with God. And now I feel as though I was naturally built for silence.”<sup>1</sup>

Advent can be a time of silence for us too, it can be a time when we reflect and anticipate the joy of the coming of our Saviour into the world. However, it will take a bit of effort to remove the distractions of the other Christmas preparations that fill our minds, the present shopping and wrapping, the food preparations and even the card writing. It is a difficult task, but this silence will enable us, like John the Baptist, to focus on that which is still to come, and according to Gandhi it will be well worth it.

I recently stumbled across something called Tiny Advent Poems by Amy Scott Robinson and Richard Lyall. There are 24 altogether, one for each day of Advent, but here are two of my favourite ones, that also contain a few moments of silent anticipation.

Advent, is the hush in the theatre, between the house lights going down, and the curtain going up.

Advent: the conductor raises his baton, the choir takes a collective breath.

All the Tiny poems capture the sense of joy and anticipation of something great being on the horizon, just out of reach, but absolutely imminent. Where we are now, in our second week of Advent, the joy of Christmas and the opportunity to celebrate is almost here, but let's not rush ahead and miss out on the thrill of the anticipation. Let us be still, and silent, and listen for God's message to each one of us.

Let's pray

Dear God

Thank you for sending John the Baptist to prepare a way for Jesus. Help us to stop and listen for your voice as we anticipate the joyful celebrations of Jesus birth and what that meant for all of humanity.

Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, Harijan, 10-12-'38 in "Truth is God" Chapter 18, Value of Silence

