

## Advent 2

By God's Grace may I speak in the name of the God who was and is and is to come. Amen.

On the second Sunday of Advent, the church reflects on prophets. Prophets are called to hold truths against the lies that we have come to believe. Sometimes it feels like a huge relief to hear such truths, like someone finally shines a light into the hopelessness and despair we have lived in. Sometimes though the truths prophets speak are uncomfortable, challenging and maybe even scary, because listening to the prophetic voice demands of us to change and to undertake a journey into the unknown. It takes courage to speak such truths, and it takes courage to listen to these truths.

In our gospel reading today Luke quotes words from the book of the prophet Isaiah to describe what the prophet John the Baptist was called to do:

**Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.**

John the Baptist was called to prepare the way for the Lord, for Jesus who would come after him to bring salvation to all people. I like the imagery that is used here. Straight paths shall be made, so the way to the Lord and

salvation is as accessible as possible. Valleys must be filled in, presumably with the mountains that are to be made low, so that it's all level. It's a lovely image, but actually demands back breaking labour. It takes a lot of shovelling to get rid of mountains and to fill in the valleys.

John the Baptist as a prophet was called to do that kind of work and I think it is generally a good description of the hard work prophets are called to do. Shovel away mountains and fill in the valleys, levelling the ground, straightening and smoothing the path, so all people can easily see and encounter God's salvation. God's abundance of love and grace revealed to us in Jesus Christ is to be easily accessible. And knowing the world as we do, I think we are all aware there is an awful lot of hard work and shovelling needed. It is hard work to speak truth, and it is hard work to truly listen to truth.

But what are those mountains and valleys made of, that need so much shovelling? Well, I am sure we can all think of some things. The small and great injustices of this world. The ever-expanding gap between the super-rich and the poor. The destruction of the only planet we can live on, through greed and selfishness. Discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+ people, against people with disabilities, against people of Global Majority Heritage and so on and so on. There is no shortage of mountains and valleys that hide God's love and grace for all people. To level these mountains and valleys, to speak and listen to truth, is hard work and takes courage, but it is of the utmost importance.

There are prophets, who speak truth and shovel away at the mountains and valleys, of all times. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian and pastor, who spoke out against the ideologies and injustices of the Nazi regime in Germany and was executed by the Nazis. Or Dr Martin Luther King, the American theologian and pastor, who affirmed the dignity of Black

people, challenged the status quo of inequality, helping people to imagine a different future, and who was publicly murdered. I also think of Malala, fighting for the education of girls all over the world or Greta Thunberg challenging the world to fight climate change. It is hard work to speak truth, and it is hard work to truly listen to truth.

What are today's lies that obstruct people's path and view of Jesus Christ? What truths are we called to speak? What truths are being spoken to us, that we need the courage to truly listen to, ready to undertake the hard work of shovelling to level mountains and valleys, to straighten the path for the coming of Jesus Christ?

There is no shortage of mountains and valleys that need levelling, so starting close to home might be a good idea. As the Church we have built valleys and mountains to obstruct people's path and view of Jesus Christ. We have made people feel unwanted and unwelcome, because of their culture or ethnicity, because of their sexual orientation or their gender, or because they have a disability. We have ignored the voices and the pain of people, who have suffered abuse within the church. These are the mountains and valleys within the church, that hinder people's encountering of God's love and radical welcome. So, what would it look like for us as the Church to respond to the prophetic call to repent, change our ways and prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ?

I pray that God may grant us all the courage to speak truth and to truly listen to truth, when it is spoken to us. May God give us willing hearts to undertake the hard work of shovelling and levelling the mountains and valleys, which obstruct the path and view of Jesus Christ.

Amen