

In 2008 the Diocese of Sydney, Australia, hosted World Youth Day. More than half a million people were in attendance and the event was presided over by Pope Benedict XVI. But the pope did not simply decide to attend the event at the last minute. World Youth Day was the culmination of more than 2 years of planning. An army of security workers, media professionals and diplomats both in Rome and in Australia worked long, hard hours to make sure everything was ready for the arrival of His Holiness.

Great personages do not simply show up, unannounced. Their coming is proclaimed in advance so that the people may prepare.

The same thing happens when we entertain guests for a visit or a dinner or a party. We want them to feel welcome and comfortable. We want the visit to go well and we do not want our guests to leave disappointed.

In today's Gospel, that is exactly what is happening. The prophetic Book of Malachi predicted that the prophet Elijah would appear to herald the arrival of the Lord. For thousands of years the Jewish people have waited for the return of Elijah. But Jesus tells us that John the Baptist is that herald, the forerunner, come in the spirit and power of Elijah. He is sent to the people to prepare them for the arrival of the Messiah. The Messiah, the Christ, is the anointed one who will deliver the people from the bondage of sin and death. John urges the people to prepare for the coming of the Christ.

During the four weeks of Advent, John the Baptist plays a central role. Advent is all about anticipating the coming of Christ, past, present, and future. We celebrate His coming in the past as a child in Bethlehem. We prepare for His new, spiritual coming this year. And we prepare for His future second coming at the end of all things.

The word "Advent" is from a Latin term that means to come towards. Jesus is coming towards us in a new way this year, as He comes in a new way every year. Every year we are in a different moment of our lives, and every year we have the opportunity to receive

Jesus in a new way. This is what we prepare for. The message of John the Baptist tells us to be ready.

Saint Luke shows the importance of the arrival of Jesus by telling us that His arrival was the fulfillment of ancient prophecy, and not only His arrival, but the arrival of John as well.

So how do we prepare?

First we prepare the way by making paths straight and smooth. In the ancient world, especially in the time of Isaiah before the Romans, roads were notoriously unreliable. They were in constant danger of being washed away, pitted with sinkholes, and plagued with bandits. Before a person of high rank travelled these roads his agents went ahead of him, making sure the roads were safe, and passable. They did all they could to make sure their charge could travel quickly and without delay.

For us here today it means to prepare our souls. Since we do not know the day or the hour the preparation of our souls is a constant never ending effort. But it is during Advent that we pay special attention because in addition to a season of joy Advent has somewhat of a penitential character.

Our busy world gets even busier this time of year and so it is even more important for us to spend some quiet time in prayer, examining our hearts for any obstacles caused by our own selfishness that damages our relationship with God as well as our relationships with our friends and family. We need to look for habits that have arisen out of laziness or self-indulgence that threaten our self discipline. And we need to fill in those spiritual pot holes and clear away the debris that prevents God's grace from flowing into our hearts.

God comes to us through the road of our hearts and it is important that we make that way as straight and smooth as possible.

We can start by making a good confession, repenting of any mortal sin that has washed out the road to our heart and broken our relationship with God. Absolution repairs that road and makes it smooth and straight. (On Monday evening at 6pm, we will have a penance service here in the Church, with several priests available to hear confessions.)

We do this because we need God's grace, as individuals, as family, and as God's adopted sons and daughters. The peace and joy and meaning of our lives cannot be achieved through our efforts alone. We need it brought to us. We need someone to search us out, find us in the stormy seas of the world, and offer a guiding hand to the waters of eternal life.

Isaiah tells us that all flesh will see the salvation of God. We need a savior. When man fell from grace the entire world fell with him. We need a savior to lift us from our fallen state and restore the world, to make all things new. Jesus always comes to us with His saving grace just as He did two thousand years ago at that first Christmas. He always wants to bring us closer to God, something we all long for deep in our hearts.

But He will not force His way in. God has given us the freedom to choose and as much as He wants us to be in communion with Him, He respects that freedom.

There is an old joke about a man whose house was threatened by a rising flood. As water spilled into his home he climbed up onto the roof. The water rose higher and he called upon God to save him. Almost immediately a man came by in a small rowboat and offered to take the homeowner to safety. "No," the man replied, "God will save me." So the small boat left and waters rose higher.

Again the man called out to God for rescue and again a boat, a much larger boat, came by, offering to help. "No," said the man again, "I have faith that God will save me." The boat went on its way and the flood waters began to creep up the roof of the house. Once again the man called upon God for salvation and within moments a helicopter appeared

unrolling a rope ladder to the stranded man. Again the man refused, relying on God to save him.

Well the water continued to rise and the man drowned. As he stood before God in the after life he complained. “Lord, I have been faithful to you all my life, why didn't you save me?” “What are talking about,” responded God, “I sent you two boats and a helicopter.”

Our fallen world has been darkened and separated from God due to sin. Not only the original sin of our first parents but our own personal sins as well. Jesus is the ladder, lowered down to us by the father.

We have a savior but we must freely choose to listen to Him, accept His words, and bring Him into our hearts. This means repenting of our sins and leaving behind our selfish tendencies that prevent us from climbing the ladder of salvation. This is the message the Church wants us to hear during this season of Advent.

Christ was born into flesh two thousand years ago, to be our savior. He continues to come to us spiritually, offering us the grace of His salvation. And He will come again at the end of this age to bring His plan of salvation to its final fulfillment.

This is our God; a God who comes to us, a God who wants to be involved in our world and in our lives ever more deeply.

All of the activities that are highlighted during this season; prayer, confession, Advent Wreaths, and Christmas decorations, are meant to encourage us to let God be more involved in our lives. We should be thankful for these reminders of His goodness, love, and mercy.

But we should also remember that we are the fortunate ones. We are gathered here, listening to His word, being reminded of His plan, and encouraged in our faith.

But what about all the people who are not here today? What about all the people who pay mere lip service to their faith if they even recognize it at all? Jesus came to save them as well. They are also in danger of drowning in a world deluged by sin. They are in need of a rescue ladder just as much as we are

As part of our preparation for Christmas, let us reach out to others. Spread the Good News and remind everyone that God wants to be involved in their lives, just as He has reminded us here today. You do not need to be preachy, you do not need to be pushy. All you need to do is invite a conversation by being so full of joy that people will want to know what you are so happy about. You can start simply and thumb your nose at the secular world at the same time. All you need to do is wish people a merry, blessed, Christmas.