

Prepare the Way of the Lord

Bar. 5: 1-9; Ps. 126; Phil. 1: 3-6, 8-11; Lk. 3: 1-6

One major area of specialization in civil engineering is the design and construction of roads. In an area that has many hills and valleys, such as in Israel, some earthworks are required to prepare the way for a road to be constructed. Instead of requiring the traffic to go up the steep hills and down into the valleys, the engineer tries to design the road to reduce the up-and-down travel. Hills are cut down and the surplus soil is used to fill in the valleys. The engineer designs the road to balance out the 'cut and fill' requirements as much as possible to both minimize the quantity of excess soil resulting from the cutting and to minimize the quantity of soil that must be imported for the filling.

In the time period of Luke's Gospel, Israel was under the oppressive occupation of the Romans. The Jews were praying for someone to save them from their suffering and to restore their nation to its former glory. John the Baptist announced the coming of the Lord. He preached a baptism of repentance telling the people that he was simply setting the stage for the one who was to come. He prophesied that Jesus would come but that, to prepare for Him, they must make a radical change in their thoughts and actions.

John quoted the words of the prophet, Isaiah, saying: '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.' John's message could be interpreted to point toward Christmas Day and the birth of the child Jesus, a joyous and significant event in our salvation history, but John also pointed to the return of Jesus into the world at the end of time to gather His faithful followers to Himself.

John uses the road-building analogy to tell us that Jesus is coming but we must do something to prepare for His arrival. We must cut down the mountains in our lives and fill in the valleys to prepare a smooth and level path for Jesus to come into our hearts. And what are these 'mountains' and 'valleys'? We can think of them as our sinfulness which acts as a barrier to Jesus.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church identifies seven capital sins: pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth. They are called capital sins because they engender other sins. We need to cut down our mountains of pride, avarice, envy and wrath while filling in our valleys of lust, gluttony and sloth. These sins act as barriers to Jesus' entry to our hearts.

In addition, there are many distractions, habits, vices, and addictions that can make the road into our hearts a long and winding one. We need to work at making the road straighter to allow Jesus an easier entry to our hearts.

We may find the work overwhelming. We may feel that the quantity of 'cutting-and-filling' and the amount of straightening and levelling is too much for our limited capabilities. There is simply too much soil to be moved.

This Advent season, let us try to make a straight and level path for the Lord so He can enter and heal us. Even if we are not able to make much headway, we can have confidence in the knowledge that 'nothing is impossible for God'. Even if there are many barriers remaining, we trust that Jesus can still enter our hearts and fill in the empty valleys in our lives while cutting down the mountains that prevent us from being fully alive.