A couple of years ago I asked the children at my local school what we called the weeks leading up to the birth of Jesus. A forest of hands shot up...but as often happens with children, when I asked the first few what their answer might be they had forgotten what they planned to say.
I gave them a clue..."It begins with Ad..."
Instant answer “Christmas Advertising, Mother Kathryn”

Highly entertaining...but also a bit of a reality check, because Advent, really, demands quite a lot of us. Those four weeks of preparation to celebrate Christ's birth should involve us in a lot of inner preparation too. It’s not all shopping lists, tricky decisions about round robin letters or even filling the freezer. Advent, traditionally, is the time when we're encouraged to think about Christ’s coming at the end of time, as well as his coming as the baby of Bethlehem...the time when we ponder the four last things...Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell
Hard work, then....but our reading this evening, the one set for today in Anglican churches all over the world, talks about good news. Mark is the most immediate, hard-hitting of the evangelists – so it’s typical of him that we are plunged straight into action from the very first word of his gospel

The beginning of the good news...

How wonderful
How exciting
A bit like getting a mysterious parcel that you just KNOW will contain something amazing
Good news...
Wow
So...you rip off a corner of the paper and see

Ummm

Something old...something familiar....something maybe a little bit confusing.

The beginning of the good news seems to have its roots embedded in the deep past – in the words of Isaiah....

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."

A voice ...shouting....issuing a command, it seems...a command to change the landscape of the world here and now...
Is that good news?
How do you feel when confronted with huge changes?
Excited—enthusiastic?
Or anxious and reluctant?
Typically, human beings don’t seem to enjoy change that much...but this is THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS, remember...

Of course there is some reassurance here.
We’re preparing the way of the Lord....the path that our that God will surely use...the royal road made ready just for him, - but before he comes to us along that highway there will need to be something very much like an earthquake.
Nothing will ever be the same again, - this is more than a little gentle landscaping for roads aren’t built without a dramatic effect on the countryside. Whenever a new motorway or ring road is proposed, the press is full of stories of
protestors anxious not to see valleys and hills levelled, and the natural contours altered beyond recognition. No matter that a greater good may be evident, - perhaps an historic market town will be freed from the impact of streams of heavy goods vehicles, threatening the foundations of houses that have stood for centuries. Despite this, we’re reluctant to opt for change, - we don’t know what it will look like, and the unknown is always alarming.

But God can’t come to us, it seems, until the paths are straight, the way ahead clear...

Such, then, is the message of John the Baptist...for it is he to whom Isaiah has been pointing, the herald in the wilderness whose message offers both challenge and hope.

He’s such an extraordinary figure.
A wild man striding towards us out of the desert...beginning Mark’s gospel without any preliminary niceties...bringing us straight up against our need to do some serious work if we want to be ready for the coming of the Lord.
John
The unexpected child of worthy, religious parents, from the moment his name was chosen (John– not Zechariah...JOHN!) he steps aside from their respectable heritage, chooses another path, claims a heritage with the prophets of old.
Dressed like Elijah he calls his listeners back to their roots, reminds them of their ancient covenant with God.
A man on the edge, he chooses to live and minister miles away from civilisation, yet draws crowds from all over the country.
A radical voice he brings new meaning to familiar religious custom, exhorting his hearers, one and all, to prepare.
Prepare!
Clear away the rubbish, strip out the dead wood, straighten the twisted, distorted pathways of your heart,
The Lord is coming!
Prepare and repent!

That’s his message for us today, as we make our journey along the Advent road...
That good news package we were so eager to open earlier involves us in some serious changes...
We need to change, to repent because the kingdom of heaven is arriving.

That’s why the liturgical colour for this season is purple or blue...the colours of repentance
Because Advent is a season for penitence
Now is the time for us to recognise the ways in which our lives are off course and to turn again.....
It’s the only way
You can’t set things right if you don’t admit first that they are wrong.
The trouble is that most of us really hate doing that.
We don’t like to feel
guilty or ashamed – feelings that almost always go with owning up to sin and failure.
In fact we’ll often do almost anything to avoid those feelings...
The structure of the Anglican service of Holy Communion encourages us in this process, by including a short act of penitence as we begin our worship – but I sometimes doubt if any of us really engages with that.
We feel safer staying hidden...even if we know deep down that hiding is impossible in the face of the God to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid
But, you know, it’s vital that we come out of hiding.
If our relationship with God isn’t based on honesty then it is not going to get very far...and wonderfully, the more we are willing and able to be honest to God, the more we realise that it is SAFE to come out of hiding, safe to be ourselves, safe to present ourselves to God, warts and all...which is surely the beginning of the Good News, right enough!

But we seem determined to fight it, somehow. People are complicated, aren’t we?
With good news there in black and white, we struggle to believe it....because so often, we fear that repentance is pointless, because we're stuck with the destructive patterns of behaviour...Often we find it hard to repent, hard even to acknowledge there is anything to repent of, because deep down we think there is nothing that can be done about it anyway. We think that it’s unforgiveable, irreparable. No wonder we want to hide it. We are afraid it would...
overwhelm us if it came up into the light. We claim to believe in God, but actually we don’t. We only believe in us, in our own ability to set ourselves straight.
If we can’t think of a way to deal with our sin, we assume that God won’t be able to either, so it is best to keep it all firmly under wraps and hope it stays that way.

But one of the great Advent themes is Judgement...that moment when the secrets of all hearts are laid bare...
Is that good news?
It certainly need not be something to fear.

Listen to some words from Rowan Williams
“God forbid we say no we can’t cope with the truth, we’d prefer our own darkness. And so part of our self-examination during Advent is looking into ourselves and saying, ‘Well can I get myself to the point where I can look at God and say well there’s truth and there’s beauty and light and love and it’s painful for me, weak and stupid though I am, to face that, and yet I’d rather be there with the truth, however much it costs, than be locked up with myself?’
During Advent, we try to get ourselves a bit more used to the truth - the truth about ourselves, which is not always very encouraging, but the truth about God above all which is always encouraging. The One who comes will come with a great challenge. It will be like fire on the earth as the Bible says. And yet the One who comes is coming in love. He’s coming to set us free. And that’s something well worth waiting for.”

So— this Advent parcel really does contain good news. It isn’t that we are just fine and dandy as we are. It is that God is not defeated by our sin – not even by the sins of those who nail Jesus to the cross. The love and forgiveness that seems quite beyond us – to give or to receive - is not out of God’s reach at all.

We just need to recognise ourselves as the flawed and failing people that we are...to have the courage to engage with the road-works, to prepare the way in our hearts and our lives and then.....well, then the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people will see it together.
Good news indeed.