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Whenever I drive along country highways, it is always interesting to note old sections of road slowly being replaced by new sections of highway. Narrow, winding and dilapidated roads are replaced by wide, new, smoother and safer sections of road. It really is amazing watching an engineering masterpiece such as a four-lane highway literally take shape from the landscape.

This event in daily life helps us to understand one of the key biblical themes of the Advent season that we hear over and over again; prepare a way for the Lord. From both the Old Testament and the figure of John the Baptist in the New Testament, we hear this profound call from the scriptures to prepare the way of the Lord, literally to make a smooth highway that ushers in the reign of God, the power of God's kingdom. Just like in practical daily life, the call is to change old, narrow and dilapidated roadways into a smooth highway for God. Every obstacle must be removed; the valleys must be filled in, the mountains and hills made low.

Of course this image from the scriptures is not about road construction and engineering but about removing the obstacles from our hearts that prevent us from receiving the good news of the birth of the Saviour. The role of John the Baptist is to call us to conversion, to help us see with new eyes and fresh vision, with renewed faith and confidence that which God is doing in our lives and in the world. The task of John the Baptist was to help remove the obstacles, to enable the people to see with fresh eyes, to rejoice in the day of salvation which was at hand.

Joy is the predominant theme of this Advent and Christmas season. Again, Isaiah in today's first reading calls the people to go up the mountain, to shout with joy the good news of God who comes to save his people, the God who comes to set their hearts free, who comes to remove the yoke of oppression. For most of this year, we have heard and seen stories around the world of war, barbarism and brutality; places where every day people's rights and human dignity are trampled upon. Here in Australia debate continues about the humane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, debate continues about reconciliation with

the indigenous people's of this ancient land. This reality puts us in touch with the great Advent theme of peace.

The themes of peace and righteousness are clear in today's second reading, the promise of the new heavens and the new earth, the place where righteousness will be at home. Sadly, just like in our day, the times of the scriptures had to contend with war, oppression, bloodshed and violence. And in the midst of this, the early Christians bring the hope of the Gospel, the early Christians quote the ancient prophets that in the end it is not violence that will rule but God's truth, peace, justice and righteousness. This Advent season is about drawing close to the mystery of Jesus the word made flesh, the infant child of Bethlehem who is called the Prince of Peace. That child born in the stable is the hope of all nations, Jesus is the peace that ends the violence, Jesus is God's hope and joy for all. Having travelled to Italy recently, the words of Pope Francis were in the media literally every day. He continues to call for peace and for Christians to work for peace. He calls us to let go of our selfish egos and to lay down our lives in the service of others, especially the poor and vulnerable. In fact, on his recent visit to a mosque in Turkey, Pope Francis prayed for an end to all war, so great is the call to peace now at this time.

The child born in the stable at Bethlehem is poor and vulnerable and humble. God lets go of his mighty power in order to embrace us and transform our weakness. John the Baptist is that great figure who embraces poverty and humility in order to point the way to Jesus. And, as his disciples, like the John the Baptist, we are called to prepare the way.