Sermon for 2nd Advent Year C

Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

i

Thank goodness for church Nativity plays that start appearing at the beginning of December. Without them the Church’s run-up to Christmas would be a sobering and uncomfortable ride. Advent season traditionally kicks off with a consideration of the Day of Judgement and the end of time; it then progresses through various fiery OT prophets to the rather caustic acclamations of John the Baptist. It is usual that both preachers and congregations meet 4th Advent with a sigh of relief as we can finally embrace the Christmassy theme of the Virgin Mary and carol service, but by then Mary is often swept aside by the children’s Nativity Play.

Who has not smiled and cried at the sight of little angels with their white wings and tinsel halos, shepherds in their tea-towel headgear and Wise Men with their bricks of paper gold and the odd donkey who loses his tail and has it picked up by one of the teachers before the innkeeper is sent sprawling.

Today, however, we are presented with Malachi’s warning that the long-awaited coming of the Lord to his temple would be like a refining fire, or like fuller’s soap; it will be a time of cleansing and purifying of God’s holy priests and people.

Secondly, we are presented today with John the Baptist’s opening words – fortunately we are spared the more fearsome bits that come later about nests of vipers and axes laid at the roots of trees, but we hear enough to get a feel for what tirades are to follow.

ii

Let’s start with Malachi.

Malachi dates from after the temple and city of Jerusalem were rebuilt following the Exile in Babylon. Despite this marvellous tour de force of reconstruction after the devastation of war, the prophet accuses the priests of becoming lazy in their worship, offering below-standard sacrifices and of leading the people to dishonour their God.

Malachi speaks of marriage and divorce. He is probably using this as a metaphor for Judah’s lack of faithfulness to the covenant. Judah was once married to God in a close and loving relationship, but now they have married other women and divorced their first wife – that is, they have abandoned God and espoused new interests and priorities in life.

The result is that the priesthood needs a complete overhaul. Things are currently so bad that their half-hearted efforts in the temple have no effect; God has turned his back on them. They then complain that there is no point in believing, because the wicked prosper better than the righteous – and thus they are tempted even more to give up on their faith.

Malachi says, God is still just, but the priests have led the people into such a state of apathy that God has now turned his back on their worship. The lack of any power in their religion has been their own doing. They should have made more effort to be faithful.

One response to this apparent break down in the effectiveness of their religion is to long for the day when all would be put right by the Day of the Lord – or in other circles of Judaism – the coming of the Messiah. This brings us to today’s passage in Malachi 3:1-4.

In today’s passage, Malachi is telling the people that wishing for the Day of the Lord to come may not be quite what they are hoping for. It will not be a happy time when God’s glory descends once again to the rebuilt temple, but it will be a time of judgement, cleansing and replacing of the old with the new.

The coming of God to his temple will be preceded by his messenger who will come like a refining fire, a super-hot fire that is so hot it can melt away the dross and impurities even in metals. This is no cosy cottage fire in front of which we would wish to sit and read on a cold winter’s day. This is very, very hot and difficult to endure, but its heat is necessary to fulfil its purpose. This is industrial fire.

Fuller’s soap is no luscious beauty balm to clean and soften the skin. Fuller’s soap is a strongly alkaline soap used to cleanse, bleach and beat newly woven woollen garments to thicken up the fibres, or make them “full” –hence Fuller’s soap. I’ve never used it, but I suspect it’s absolute murder on the hands and a very caustic and unpleasant thing to use.

That is what the Day of the Lord will be – and it is the fault of the priests and the people who have followed their lead.

iii

The temple of Malachi’s generation has just received a major spruce-up in Herod the Great’s forty-year building programme when John the Baptist steps onto the scene. Unfortunately, the rebuild has done nothing to assuage God’s dissatisfaction with the priests and all that the temple is trying to achieve.

Luke situates John within world history according to the conventions of the day, giving the year of Tiberius’ reign, and various more local reference points for a Jewish audience. The fifteenth year of Tiberius equates to 29AD. By this stage Tiberius was a semi recluse living on the isle of Capri.

The emperor would have been a very distant figure to the Jews as to most other subject peoples within the empire and we know that the Jews were constantly on the edge of rebellion throughout the first century.

Herod the Great had been a favourite in Rome under Augustus, but once his firm grip had gone, the Jews were almost ungovernable and the whole nation came to a catastrophic end in AD 70 and the later revolts in the second and third Jewish-Roman Wars in the early 2nd century. Jewish history finds strange echoes today of modern countries that have fallen apart after the removal of the iron grip of tyranny.

In AD 31, during Jesus’ ministry, Tiberius became very popular for a short while among the Jewish elite, because he said the freedom of worship which Jews had enjoyed since the days of Herod the Great’s father, should still be respected throughout the empire.

John the Baptist didn’t live to see that. When he stepped onto the scene there were many waiting hopefully for their Messiah to emerge, the one who would renew their country and shake off the oppressive hand of Rome. They had failed to heed the warnings of Malachi and others. They were about to find out the Day of the Lord was going to be a rough ride.

John takes himself to the wilderness of the Jordan - perhaps this is the safest distance from Jerusalem at which to operate.

John’s message is one that is full of hope as well as rebuke. The whole world will see God’s salvation – just as the Jews had longed for from the time of Abraham. But first, they must accept that they are on the wrong track; they have been misled and only if they repent – or turn around – to paraphrase the Greek of the NT – will they see this salvation themselves.

Despite the rebuke contained in John’s pronouncement and the obvious challenge of getting out to the wilderness spot to hear John, many people are attracted to him and many show themselves ready to make that U-turn – that act of repentance – in order to prepare themselves for what God is about to do among them.

Those who are prepared to hear what the Lord **actually** has to say, rather than assume they **already know** what the Lord has to say, will become the new Israel, the new kingdom of priests, who will receive the promised new covenant and be the ones charged with taking this salvation to all the earth.

As we meet today, the heirs of those first folk who responded to the Baptist’s call to prepare themselves to receive the Good News, we too must prepare ourselves to hear again the Good News of Christmas.

As in the Baptist’s day, we must start by repenting any sense of apathy or laziness that has crept in to our religious life. Sometimes we go to sleep because it all becomes a bit comfortable, a bit too routine. We need to remind ourselves that the way of the cross is never routine and never comfortable.

We also need to repent of anything in our lives that suggests we have got on to the wrong track, that we have misunderstood what the Gospel is about and what it means for our world today.

Yet there is no need for wholesale panic about this. We have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. We may have made some mistakes this year, as individuals, as a parish, even as a denomination, but that is always redeemable. We can never go so far off course as a Church, that we can lose salvation.

This is what Methodists call the *indefectibility* of the Church. As Protestants, we reject the notion that any one person such as the Pope can be *infallible,* nor do Methodists usually talk about the *inerrancy of Scripture*, but we do believe that God’s love for the Church means that God would never allow the Church as a whole to become so off track and disobedient, that salvation was no longer possible through the ministries and proclamation of the Church.

This does not mean, however, that any individual member cannot become so lost, deluded and foolish as to lose salvation. So Advent is a time set apart before Christmas to examine ourselves in preparation for the Coming of the Christ Child.

Where have we gone off track? How much have we lost heart and enthusiasm? What marvellous things of God do we just take for granted? When did we last do the slightest thing to enable the salvation of God to be seen throughout the world?

If we do not ask ourselves these difficult questions from time to time, the danger is that meeting the Christ Child in the flesh will turn out to be not quite the happy day we are expecting it to be.

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