

Sunday 9th December, 2018
The Second Sunday of Advent - Year C

Malachi 3:1-14
Psalm: Song of Zechariah
Philippians 1:1-11
Luke 3:1-6

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

When we consider the season of Advent, there are many aspects to consider. There is the focus on the coming of God's kingdom - and how Jesus brings that kingdom into the world by his coming amongst us at Christmas. There is the emphasis on Advent as a period of hoping; of anticipation. And there is much made about the waiting aspect of Advent, and about the preparing. And certainly this has been my experience of the season, and I have rightly seen this as a large focus of the season -preparing our hearts and minds for the coming amongst us of God in human form.

As I read today's lessons, however, I become more aware of another aspect of Advent; a more proactive and up-front aspect which we perhaps tend to gloss over, or even miss completely. And it comes to us in the voice of the Prophet; well, actually the voices of two Prophets, Malachi and John the Baptist.

I don't think we can help ourselves, that when we hear the word "prophet", our minds go to old men with white flowing beards; Old Testament Holy men calling out "thus says the Lord". A step or two heavenwards from reality, or somewhat detached from real life. Yet prophets are simply people who read the signs of the times and interpret them for their people. Prophets are people who hear God's word and apply it to what they see in the world around them, discerning what is wrong and unjust, and reminding us of it.

So, today, firstly, we hear the voice of Malachi, proclaiming the coming of a messenger; one who will refine and purify Yahweh's people by means of judgment. As the fire of the metallurgist separates the precious metal from the dross, as the launderer's soap purges the grime, so the messenger of Yahweh will banish sin from the life of the people.

In today's Gospel, the figure of John the Baptist also looms large out of the wilds, perhaps in many ways reinforcing those preconceptions of "prophet" that we hold. But let's look carefully at how Luke introduces this prophetic figure at this point in the Gospel, because it opens a window to us on the way in which God calls and uses ordinary people to proclaim his way.

The Gospel reading begins like a history lesson: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis"...and so it goes on with a roll-call of the Who's Who of ancient Israel and surrounding regions ...Emperors, governors, rulers, High Priests: in all, six names of six highly placed political and religious figures - historically validated figures.

With a few deft strokes of the pen, the Gospel writer Luke situates us solidly in time and place. Nothing airy-fairy here - this is concrete reality. We are to find the things of God - the voice of God - embedded in real places and in real time. And so, against this backdrop, the word of God comes - not to the High Priests or to any of these political or judicial leaders of society, but to John, a wilderness dweller, Son of Elizabeth and Zechariah.

And the word of God is found not in a palace or Temple, but in the desert. John the Baptist prepares the way for "all flesh" - all humankind - to be drawn into the purposes of God, into the coming kingdom of forgiveness, love and mercy, and into the justice work of this kingdom.

John the Baptist does two things in preparing us for our prophetic roles in this kingdom: he calls people to repent - to turn around, to change direction, to follow a new path; and he takes us to the prophet Isaiah's words: words that herald the coming of Lord; words that tell of the new order in society with that Coming - a world where injustices and unevenness would be levelled and where God's salvation would be open to all humanity; a realm of justice and peace.

John the Baptist tells us - a change of heart, a change of direction moves us into a new way of living where love and justice govern our lives. His equation goes like this: hear God's word, turn your life around to follow him and do what he says, and take action.

This season of Advent, and this Gospel message particularly today, invites us to consider what our turning to Christ - our repentance - means in terms of how we are preparing the way of the Lord. The question for us becomes: How are we encountering God deep within our own lives, and how are we involved in the preparation of the world's encountering of him - here and now in everyday realities, and in the realm of God to come? Can we identify ourselves as God's ordinary prophets?

It sounds simple to say "hear, turn and act", doesn't it? And I think most of us get it and do some of it, at least in parts. Especially the bits about mercy and compassion and desire for peace. But all too often there is a deafening silence in the face of injustice.

I think many of us can identify that we are still very much on the way, very much still the people of God under construction. There's a danger, there, however, in getting stuck with that - feeling OK about getting part of the way, and then comfortably staying still. Or worse still, even actively resisting God's invitation to shape us further into his ways.

What gets in the way? Particularly, what keeps us silent? What stops our prophetic voices, what stops our prophetic actions? We could I think name fear: speaking up for what's right will serve as an irritant and challenge to established orders and institutions; so we can fear rejection and fear controversy, but we can also fear that we'll be asked to give up something to go further into God's call. In addition, there's ignorance or lack of awareness, or a sense of our own inadequacies. We could also name the demands of other priorities in life, being already stretched too far with just our own families, with our own little patch of the world. Lots of things that can potentially get in the way.

But take heart: John the Baptist, the voice of God, forerunner of Christ, says "turn around to Christ, change direction. Accept his forgiveness. Look for, prepare for, the coming of Christ. See God at work already in the world. He is the one going before us to make the rough ways smooth". So we note this: We're not alone; God is working in us and for us, and he will keep on doing that until he returns. God calls us, he grows us and he equips us. It is never too late for us to re-turn, to recommit to allow our lives to be shaped by Christ. Just as we are, with the life of Christ and God's spirit at work in us, we have all we need to be God's ordinary prophets.

God's word and work will not necessarily flow from the hallowed halls of fame, from the governing bodies of political and religious leadership. Nor will his kingdom be centred in those places. God's call and his voice for justice will come to us and to the world through ordinary, often unlikely people and in ordinary and unlikely places. In real time and in real places. And what's more, God calls all of us to be those sorts of people too: a people who have turned away from lives of self-interest to lives built on justice, mercy and love. Lives reshaped by God at work in them, ready and empowered by God to be his ordinary prophets in the world. May you stand ready this Advent to hear and act.

In the name of God. Amen