

## Prepare the Way: Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2018

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

**Prayer:** Father, may my spoken words be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Good morning everyone. Well, here we are, the Second Sunday in Advent and already we have sent off all our cards and presents to friends and family overseas and I have been to four Christmas dinners. I'm not sure what it says on the on-line Countdown clock but for many of us preparations are well underway for Christmas Day itself.

Our theme for today is all about preparations: Prepare the Way, but before we get into that let's remind ourselves what this season of Advent is all about. Advent, as Ian said last week, means? Coming: From the Latin: *Adventus* – which In ancient Rome was a technical term for the 'glorious entry' of an emperor into his capital city.

Similarly the Greek word *parousia* was used for the pomp and ceremony that accompanied a visit by the Emperor or one of his officials to part of his empire. I guess the nearest equivalent today is a royal tour, and like a royal tour extensive preparations have to be made beforehand. For a start road repairs would have to be done to ensure a smooth ride for the Emperor and his entourage, and provisions to feed and entertain them all would have to be arranged – it was quite an undertaking. But the bonus was not only better roads but the prestige that came from hosting the Emperor and, if you were lucky, some act of generosity on his part that might see your city get a new amphitheatre or aqueduct or maybe even a new dam!!

So as we look at our own preparations throughout this Advent season, let's keep some those ideas in mind.

It's a busy time, isn't it. So many extra things to fit into our already crowded schedules. It's easy to get swamped with all the busyness and have no time to prepare ourselves for the momentous event we remember at Christmas – the coming of the Christ-child, someone far more important than any Emperor. It's a busy time for me too, so I am preaching this sermon as much to myself as to any of you.

So, this morning let us take some time to pause and to reflect on what preparing ourselves for Christmas might mean. I want to do this by looking more closely at the two passages of Scripture that were read to us this morning: one from Malachi and one from Luke. There is an obvious connection between them. Malachi is writing about a messenger to come, and Luke is writing about John the Baptist whom Jesus specifically identifies as that messenger in Luke 7:27.

Once again we are reminded of the unity of the Old and New Testaments. Some of you may remember that a couple of weeks ago I talked about the six-act drama of Scripture and the way in which the Old Testament shows us the unfolding of God's plan to rescue not only humanity but the whole of creation from the mess we are now in as the result of human selfishness and sin. We looked briefly at the way God revealed himself to his people through the ages, gradually helping them to

understand what sort of God he is; and how he is revealed more fully in Jesus, 'God with skin on;' Jesus who came to be Emmanuel, God with us, and the one who would, yet again, rescue his people, the one who would save his people from their sins.

So, let's look at this morning's two Bible passages and see how they can help us in our personal preparations this Advent.

Let's start with Malachi. What do we already know about Malachi?  
(prophet; post-exilic; 400 years before events of NT; prophet – calling people back to God; to be faithful in keeping the covenant).

By the time Malachi was written many of the Jews had returned from exile in Babylon; Jerusalem had been restored and the Temple had been rebuilt. But it wasn't like it used to be! I'm sure some of us can identify with that feeling. When we had our service to mark the end of the old hall, people were telling stories of when the Sunday school was full of children, and of all the good times you used to have. Some of the Jews of Malachi's day felt the same. They had become disillusioned with God's failure to act and restore some sort of golden age. In a passive-aggressive way they were letting things slide. If you have time read through Malachi and you will see some of the things they were guilty of: intermarriage and compromise with the surrounding culture; the people offering to God animals that they would not have dared to present to the Governor and the priests going along with it; withholding tithes – indicating a half-hearted commitment and a failure to provide for those who depended on the tithes; biased decision making and failing to speak out against social injustices. All actions that spoke of their lack of respect for the God who loved them, for these were God's people.

So, what is God's response to this situation?

Well, he gives a promise, but one that contains within it a warning.

Malachi 3:1 – "Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple."

You want me to come, God says, you want me to intervene on your behalf? Well, I will come but it may not be what you were expecting. Be careful what you ask for in other words.

"Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? asks Malachi. This is all battle imagery. Bodies on a battlefield; not what they had in mind. "I will come to put you on trial." V 5. The language of judgment.

We seem to have lost sight of the traditional 'warm-fuzzies' of Christmas: love, joy and peace on earth, at least momentarily.

Malachi's words challenge our preconceptions that all will be sweetness and light for us when God does finally appear.

But judgment isn't necessarily about punishment and destruction.

Our God is a God of grace, a God of second chances. I love that verse in Jonah that says: "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time," (Jonah 3:1). Yes he messed up the first time and ended up in a big fish, but Jonah got a second chance and this time he chose to obey God and go to Nineveh.

So God promises to send a messenger to prepare the way – to prepare his people for his coming. Then when the Lord comes (the Lord or the messenger of the covenant), instead of destroying his people he refines and purifies them. This is what preparation is about.

Malachi gives us two illustrations of what he has in mind. The first picture describes the way in which an alkali substance, maybe lye or fuller's earth, is used to remove grease and dirt from woollen cloth to make it whiter. A sort of ancient 'Think Pink.'

The second describes the way in which dross and impurities are removed from molten silver by heating it, allowing impurities to come to the surface and removing them until the silver is so pure that the refiner can see his face plainly reflected in the molten metal.

These are images that we find repeated not only in the OT but also in the NT, (White clothes: Dan 7:9; Matt 17:2; Mk 9:3; Rev 1:14. Refine: Zech 13:9; Ps 66:10; Isa 48:10; 1 Peter 1:7) sometimes as descriptions of God's people or, in the NT, as descriptions of Jesus himself.

Remember how Paul writes that God's purpose for us is to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29). If that is what God has in mind then maybe Christmas is about more than we thought and maybe our preparation for it will be more demanding than we thought. Maybe we need to look at how the refining process prophesied here in the OT in Malachi will find its fulfilment in the NT with the coming of Jesus.

So let's turn to our NT passage: Luke 3:1-6.

Even this early in his gospel Luke has been at pains to show the connection between the events around Jesus' birth and the fulfilment of OT prophecies and promises.

John the Baptist has already been introduced to us in the Benedictus, the Song of Zechariah, where an inspired Zechariah celebrates God's coming to his people to redeem them and describes his son, John, in these words:

"you ... will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins." (Luke 1:76-77).

Despite the 400 year gap there is a unity between what God was saying in the OT and what is now happening in NT times.

In verses 1 and 2 Luke puts John's message in its historical setting and its religious and socio-political context. Luke places it on the world stage with echelons of power stretching up to the Emperor himself. But in many ways little has changed. We know, from elsewhere that there was a widespread sense of injustice and oppression, rebellion was never far from the surface (think of the current situation in France). Institutional religion had become politicised, and Greek and Roman influences were infiltrating Jewish society. As in Malachi's day the people were looking for God to intervene, to come in power and to restore the fortunes of his people.

What they actually get is John – this weird prophetic figure who came pulling no punches and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:3). The people flocked to him. Did they recognise him as the messenger promised by Malachi – maybe, Jesus certainly did (Luke 7:27), and by the time Luke was writing his gospel this was seen as John’s role – the messenger who went ahead to prepare the way.

So, what was his message and how does it relate to our own preparation of ourselves for the coming of the Christ-child?

John is a pretty uncompromising figure. He is not afraid to use straight talking : either you change or you face the consequences of God’s wrath. Wow, we don’t hear many sermons like that now, do we? But before we get too upset let’s remember that John is talking to men and women who had already committed to being God’s people with all that that entailed. What John is doing is just what the OT prophets did – calling God’s people to come back to him, to live in his ways – which are good ways to live.

So John calls on them to repent. This is more than being really, really, really sorry. You may know that the word we translate as repentance is metanoia in the original Greek. Have you heard of metamorphosis? That’s a change of shape or form which is what caterpillars do when they become butterflies; well metanoia is a change of mind, a reorientation of our thinking. A change in our thinking should lead us to change what we do and how we live. That’s what Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is built on.

Similarly James argues that our faith, what we believe, should be seen in our deeds, what we do. We are material beings living and interacting within a material universe – what we do matters. Part of our preparation for Christmas may be to reflect on whether the way we live, the way we interact with other people and with God’s creation, is in line with the way God thinks - or have we allowed other influences ‘the world’ to shape us into its mould.

As John preached, he also challenged the people of his day to undergo a ritual baptism for their sins to be forgiven and for their recommitment to repentance. Today, we challenge ourselves each week as we confess our sins and ask God to forgive us and to renew our lives - or in the words of the old 1662 Prayer Book: to forgive us all that is past; and grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please thee in newness of life, to the honour and glory of thy name.” Repentance is on-going but maybe we need to make some space in the busyness of Christmas for some quiet reflection of what it might look like for us.

We usually put up a Christmas tree with an old set of lights that we brought with us from UK nearly 30years ago. One of the things I like to do is to wait until everyone else has gone to bed, and then switch off all the lights except for those on the tree and then take some time to be quiet and reflect.

Getting back to our NT reading. In verses 4-6 Luke quotes from the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah 40:3-5. In Isaiah the primary reference is to the Lord returning to his temple and to the people’s return from exile in Babylon, and there seem to be two parts to the passage.

On the one hand the people are called on to prepare the way and straighten the paths, and on the other the imagery of filling valleys and lowering mountains suggests a powerful move of God. The rest of Isaiah, which includes his vision of a new heavens and a new earth, seems to indicate that God plans to usher in something far greater than a simple return from exile.

And Luke uses these verses from Isaiah to point us to John as the messenger or herald of the greater salvation that Jesus will accomplish. God, through Jesus is looking to turn the world upside down.

Are you up for this? If you are, says Luke, there is some work to be done, in us and through us. One of the commentators put it like this: "The highway that clears the way for God's coming is a purified heart." All that road-straightening and earth-moving imagery calls for some soul searching on our part; not so that we can beat ourselves up, but so that we can begin to see what needs to be cleared out of our lives so that God can move in and through us. Let's allow the Word and the Spirit to begin to shape our thoughts and our lives.

Now, we are all a work in progress and there may be things in our lives that will take time to work through. I don't know about you but there are some lessons that I seem to have to learn over and over again. Sometimes it seems like one step forward and two steps back – but at least we are, hopefully, moving in the right direction, moving towards a deeper and fuller understanding of the God revealed in Scripture and most clearly seen in his Son. We are, hopefully, allowing him to do some earth-moving in our lives as he transforms us into people he can use to transform the world around us.

Advent, is a time of preparation. A time when we prepare to encounter again the Christ-child; a time when we are challenged to allow the refiner to work within us to straighten out our lives and remove any road blocks.

As we reflect on the challenge to Prepare the Way and what that might mean for each of us, I want to leave you with some words of Tom Wright:

"Christian living is far more than simply repentance, but it is not less. All spiritual advance begins with turning away from what is hindering our obedience. If John were to come down your street with a megaphone, what would he be saying?"

Let's pray

Loving God, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, into our world. Help us in this Advent season as we look forward to the coming of the Christ-child to take time out from all our busyness to prepare our hearts to welcome him into our lives in ways that we have not yet imagined. We ask this in his name and for his glory. Amen