

8 December 2024 2nd Sunday in Advent

Great St Mary's Cambridge

Sermon by Clare Stephenson

Readings

A reading from the prophet Malachi

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight— indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

(Malachi 3:1-4)

A reading from St Paul's letter to the Philippians

I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

(Phil 1:3-11)

The Gospel according to Luke

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 Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”'

(Luke 3:1-6)

SERMON

Christ our Saviour, as we look for your coming among us, open our eyes and ears to behold your presence, now and always. Amen

On this the Second Sunday of Advent we consider the voice of the prophets, Today we have heard the voice of Malachi and, in the cry of John the Baptist, of Isaiah. These prophets of the Old and New Testaments are urging the listeners to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord.

And we have heard the words of St Paul who was writing to the Christians of Philippi also about preparation. Here he describes the coming of the Lord as the “Day of Christ”.

The coming of Christ can be understood both in the here and now, and also in the future. For St Paul, his meeting with Jesus at a fixed point in time on the Damascus Road led to a profound change in the direction of his life. But Paul knew that not every corner of his life was transformed.

He recognised a daily need to turn to God so that the Spirit of Christ could come in time and time again and set him free. And yet, Paul lived in hope of a complete transformation, when Christ would come in his glory at the last day, and when every dark corner of the universe would be illuminated, and the whole created order transformed into the Kingdom of Heaven.

All our scriptures are speaking to us today about this coming which is both in the now and the not yet. Perhaps for some of us, we are at a time in our lives when it feels as if the world is a hostile wilderness. How in this age do we prepare for the coming of Christ, how can we welcome him, and what can we hope for in this coming?

To begin to answer these questions let's first examine a phrase from the Malachi passage. As is true for all of scripture, there is here, like a seam of precious metal in the earth's crust, some treasure. This treasure, rather fittingly, is the idea of silver to describe the people of God, and Malachi tells us that the Lord of Hosts is like a “refiner's fire”.

This phrase would have had potent meaning for the Israelites of the 5th century BC which was when Malachi was writing. To them, the refining of silver would have been as familiar as methods of farming. This was because silver in the form of coins and precious objects was fundamental to the functioning of society.

Silver could only be obtained in good quantity by the arduous and dangerous processes of mining and then refining of the rocky ore in which it was hidden.

The silver ore which was mined was a complex rocky mix of mostly lead based compounds, and contained only tiny traces of silver. In refining, this unpromising looking raw material was placed in two successive furnaces and flushed with air from a bellows, so that eventually the lead and the impurities were burned and blown away leaving behind, in a shallow dish, the shining molten silver.

A modern-day observer of a silver worker asked them how they recognised the moment when this process was complete and was told, “the silver is fully refined when I can see my reflection”.

To the people of ancient Israel, rich and poor, the dramatic transformation of rocky fragments to precious metal would have had profound and mysterious meaning. And whilst magical, the process would have been known to be dangerous, not only because of the intense heat, but also the toxicity of lead. Refining was probably performed by slaves or impoverished people, and it would have been costly in terms of human life.

By likening the coming of the Lord like a refiner’s fire Malachi is indicating that the people of God, and all creation, are created as silver, beautiful and reflective of our maker. And yet, we find ourselves bound up by unhelpful and toxic material. A refining process is necessary for a restoration to a state of original blessing. To undergo this process may be harsh and difficult, entailing searing heat and fierce wind.

If this is what Christ’s coming might be like, how can we prepare for it?

St Paul prayed for the people of Philippi that they would overflow with love and wisdom. Through this sort of preparation of the heart, a daily conscious and prayerful practice of love and wisdom, we too, with the help of the Holy Spirit, will learn how to participate in the coming Kingdom through loving encounters, standing up for the oppressed, and calling for justice for the earth.

Similarly John the Baptist also urges a focus on the renewal of the heart and mind. The word he uses is repentance, *metanoia* in Greek, literally meaning a change of heart and mind. He illustrates repentance in symbolic language, describing it in terms of reshaping the landscape, smoothing out hills, valleys and rough places, so Christ’s coming is no longer impeded.

For John, preparing for Christ entails a clearing of stubborn obstructions, and the obstruction is sin. His language of hills and valleys and rough ground indicates this is near impossible work which we cannot complete without divine assistance. The obstruction of sin can only be removed, after we have come to repentance, by the forgiveness of Christ. It is through the change of heart and mind of repentance we first bring our sins to God, and only then can God come to us, like the Father to the returning Prodigal son, so we can be forgiven.

We can stumble at this point, because of a misunderstanding of what sin means, and tragically this misunderstanding has largely come from the tendency in the Christian tradition to describe sin as list of forbidden activities. With this incorrect understanding of sin, our understanding of repentance then too easily becomes following a set of rules.

Instead, the root of sin goes much deeper. All sin springs from a fundamental distortion of our attitude, in which we forget our dependence upon God and our relationship with others. Sin is any thought-stream or behaviour in which the intention is to benefit the self, or in modern language, the ego, over and above the needs of the whole of creation.

Sin describes what happens when we put ourselves firmly in the driving seat of our lives. For this reason, it is all too easy to sin, just as Jesus observed in the rich ruler, even when we abide by all the rules.

The overarching sin of self-sufficiency, so valorised in our culture, inevitably causes division. Self-centred behaviour drives a wedge between ourselves and each other and also the rest of creation, as we treat aspects of the world around us as objects which either serve our needs or get in the way. Even more tragically, this sort of sin drives a wedge between us and God, and prevents us from knowing, and showing, the love which can only come from God.

It is the sin of us all which makes people today feel like they are isolated individuals or part of a tribe, looking out into a hostile world. And yet, with faith, through repentance and forgiveness, that which separates is weakened, and we begin to understand ourselves in a profoundly different way, as lovingly created, each one of us an equally valuable element in a wonderfully interconnected universe.

If we consider the whole of creation as infinitely complex machine, or, to use the biblical metaphor, a body, then sin could be compared to the particles of dirt which gets between the parts of a machine to make them seize up, or to chronic disease which penetrates the organs and breaks down the healthy state of balance of our bodies. And for Malachi, sin is likened to the impurities which bind up and hide the profound beauty and value of silver in the ore.

The Nobel prize winning author, William Golding, concluded that humankind “makes evil as a bee produces honey”. In other words, the process of sin-making, of selfishness, is inevitable and almost effortless. We can do our best in turning to God intending to do good, and this is indeed great preparatory work. However, our tendency to rely on ourselves is so fundamental to being human, we need divine assistance to help us deal with our continual generation of selfish thoughts and behaviours which separate us from God and each other, and which tend to wreak harm on the most vulnerable parts of creation.

Malachi is suggesting that, even when we have prepared as best we can, when Christ comes into our lives, it may indeed be like a refiner’s fire. There may well be affliction and great difficulty, even for the best of us. Like John the Baptist before him, St Paul was going through such a time, writing as he was from prison with execution ahead of him.

But the refiner’s fire is Christ’s saving work. Christ is the one who can clear away the contaminating lead from the silver, the dirt and disease that are the spanner in the works, and the obstructions to the coming of his Kingdom. This refiner’s costly work entails his death, but this is a fiery death which purifies and which brings life. It purifies that precious silver which is the created universe, and opens the way for love and justice and grace.

We prepare in this Advent season to turn to Christ, and as we turn, through repentance and acts of love and justice, we make ourselves ready for Christ, the refiner who died for us. And with the coming of Christ into our lives, whilst we must resist anything which causes harm or oppression, we must also trust in those times when we and those we care about come under attack or enter times of great suffering. These are times when the refiner is close.

When it feels like we are in the forge of affliction, whether because of our own failings or the wounding of others, let us know that God is working powerfully through the hot wind and fire, and let us trust and pray that at the last we will indeed come to the bright shining precious joy of the Kingdom, where our faces will reflect God’s Glory for evermore.