

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 5th December 2021
The Second Sunday of Advent

Collect

Almighty God,
purify our hearts and minds,
that when your Son Jesus Christ comes again as
judge and saviour
we may be ready to receive him,
who is our Lord and our God.

Amen.

Malachi 3:1-4

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. But 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; he 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. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6

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, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as 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.

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;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

Sermon

It is sometimes suggested that the Royal Family are very familiar with the smell of fresh paint. Just as most of us will prepare for guests by cleaning and tidying the house, a royal visit might warrant a fresh coat of paint as well as the usual clearing up. "Preparing the way" in the Ancient Near East often meant travelling along the road that the Emperor or other dignitary would be taking and ensuring that it was passable – no trees blocking the way, landslips or potholes.

Yet when the prophet Malachi speaks of a messenger who is going to prepare the way, he seems to have something quite different in mind. The notion of preparation brings with it a sense of expectation, yet as Malachi says: "who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" There is something different about this messenger, and we soon discover more. This messenger is like a refiner's fire and fuller's soap. The process of refining – whether sugar, metals, oil or anything else – is all about removing the impurities. Likewise fullers' soap was used when clothing was trampled in the river to make it clean.

The thing is, though, we aren't talking about cleaning the house or the outfit that we are going to wear. It's not about outward appearances. Instead, the kind of preparation that this messenger will expect is a preparation of ourselves. Of our hearts, minds and souls. And really that is what the season of Advent is all about. A preparation of ourselves to hear and receive once again the good news of the birth of Jesus.

So what, I wonder, might that preparation look like?

Do you notice how Luke sets out this passage in which he introduces John the Baptist? He begins by telling us when this is taking place – who was Emperor; and who was Governor; who were the rulers; and who were the high priests. All of these individuals clearly had power. And yet, when we are introduced to John the Baptist, we learn about his parentage – he is the son of Zechariah – about where he is – in the wilderness – and, most importantly, that he has received the word of God.

Can you see the contrast? On the one hand, Luke lists the top brass. The A-listers of worldly powers. Everyone who was anyone in the region at the time. And yet God's word comes to none of them, but instead to the son of the priest Zechariah in the wilderness.

Already our preparation is taking shape. We need to be prepared to have our expectations challenged. We need to look for inspiration and wisdom in unexpected places. We need to listen to those who are not necessarily the most powerful; the most visible; the most popular and recognise that it is there that we might hear the word of God. I wonder what it is that might give you that kind of insight this Advent? Whether there is somewhere that you might volunteer, or something you might read, or someone you might listen to who could help you to see the world differently. Challenge the messages that tend to dominate.

We also need to think slightly differently about the notion of wilderness. Perhaps that is quite a difficult thing to say as we continue to progress tentatively out of lockdown, watching some European countries re-introducing restrictions, and wondering whether our own government might have to do the same. We have spent a lot of time living with uncertainty. Perhaps for some of us it has felt like a kind of wilderness. And it may have left us craving clarity.

Yet it is in the wilderness that the word of God came to John the Baptist. It was in the wilderness that the Israelites encountered God, too, discovering that God was not only to be found in the Temple, but rather in a relationship that could be discovered anywhere. Later, of course, it is in the wilderness that Jesus will be tempted, yet draw ever closer to God.

So perhaps this might offer another aspect of our preparation this Advent. A willingness to understand times of wilderness in our own lives differently. If lockdown felt like a wilderness, what was it that you discovered through that time? It can be so easy to move on from such times without allowing ourselves to learn all that they had to teach us. Might you take an opportunity to pause and reflect on where you found God during lockdown? Could that guide you in your preparations for Christmas? Or have there been other wilderness times that you might draw on? And even if wilderness really does just feel like a barren landscape – even in the bleakest of times – can you dare to believe that God really is there for you?

In Christian tradition, John the Baptist is the messenger foretold by both Isaiah and Malachi. As Luke tells us, he prepared his followers for the coming of Jesus by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Do you see how we are back to the refiner's fire and fullers' soap. In baptism, as the Order of Service reminds us, we are washed and made clean. What is required is that we repent – that we turn around; see the world from a different perspective. For some of us, this might look like examining our motivations and asking ourselves what they tell us. Are there things that we need to do differently? Do we need to change direction?

The imagery can be daunting. Oil and metals are refined by bringing them to a high temperature; sugar requires pressing as well as heating. The chemicals in fullers' soap suggest more than a gentle rinse.

It may be that there are times in our lives when the need for repentance is great; that we have travelled a long way from God. Yet it's also important to remember that our Advent preparations may be altogether gentler. In fact sometimes the call is to allow ourselves just a little more time in God's presence, feeling the warmth of God's embrace, and listening to God's word. Sometimes our preparations are more about allowing ourselves to stop than chastising ourselves for what we haven't done.

After all, the purpose of our preparations, as suggested in the passage of Isaiah quoted in this morning's gospel reading, is that they should give us a clear view of God. That somehow they should help us to remove those things that distract us, and prevent us from being ready to gaze on the miracle that is Jesus. The Word made flesh. God's way of showing us all that we do not worship a distant God, but rather one who understands every aspect of our lives; knows each one of us; loves us; and longs to be with us.

Amen