

Advent 2 Preparation **Malachi 3:1-4 Luke 3:1-6**

Recap

How is your Advent going? Posted your cards? Tackled the shops?
Opened the doors on your calendar? Or burned your candle down JUST enough each day!
A friend's 4-year-old has opened all the doors on his already!! And eaten the chocolate!
But Father Christmas won't come any sooner!

Last week we were thinking about Advent being a journey, a journey together and a journey individually with God

How is your prayer grid going?

Hope that it has been helpful for some of you at least

Preparation

This week we are thinking about the preparation part of the journey

Both the Malachi and the Luke readings talk about preparation

Malachi 3:1

'I am sending my messenger to PREPARE the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.'

Luke 3:4 & 6 are verses quoted from the prophet Isaiah

'PREPARE the way of the Lord.....

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

Malachi is denouncing the sins of the leaders, the priests and the prophets because they had all lost the plot. They had lost the care and respect for the very people they were meant to be serving. And with the promise of the sudden and unpredictable arrival of the Lord, he foretells the coming of a messenger to prepare the way.

Why?

And Luke a good while later... Luke tells of God's promise being fulfilled in real time and in a real place.

Instead of the tension between the Israelites and Babylon that we were thinking about last week

This week there is tension between the Jewish people and the Romans

And Luke starts his passage right here, stating the names and positions of various, powerful, often cruel Roman leaders.

Pilate is mentioned - the Roman governor of Judea

Herod was the Roman ruler of Galilee

And Caiaphas the high priest!

Under Jewish custom the position of High Priest should have been passed down the line from father to son but this privilege had been corrupted and the Roman government had appointed religious leaders to 'control' the Jewish people.

These were influential, powerful men in positions of significant authority whose words were listened to... and obeyed

BUT God did not chose them to prepare the way for the coming Messiah
Instead He chose John. John who was the son of a priest - Zechariah - but who did not follow the family line either. John was a prophet rather than a priest.
An ordinary man who was chosen to proclaim the message of God in preparation for His coming, the arrival of the eternal one, The Lord.
We will hear more about proclamation next week

John was to begin sharing a NEW message, a new way of being, a different way of living that was pleasing to God because people had continued to slip from Gods chosen ways
And this NEW way began with repentance
His message of repentance followed by a baptism for the forgiveness of sins was radical but crucial preparation for the message that Jesus would bring.

You see, Johns father Zechariah was a priest and one of his duties was to perform the ritual cleansing that was necessary for Jewish worshippers who had become unclean through different means and this cleansing would have to take place in the temple.

But here was John, not in the temple but traveling around the region of Jordan
Not a priest but a prophet
And not cleansing people through the traditional ways but in the river as an outward sign of their inner repentance.
A visible expression of a change in a persons thinking

God didn't want just routine religion He never had. He wanted changed lives that resulted in changed ways of living.

Actually, this wasn't new and isn't new!
Hundreds of years before John the baptist God had warned the people, again through Isaiah, that they were getting it all wrong. That their fast days had become farce days
Read Isaiah 58 and it is pretty clear
verses 3 & 4 say
*Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.*

Instead God says in verse 6 onwards
*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,*

*and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator[a] shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

This is one of my favourite passages of scripture but I must not digress... too far !:-)

To make the paths straight for the coming of Jesus, to begin preparing the way for His message of Good News, John was calling people to repentance.

To a conscious decision to live life differently

Our word repentance is a translation of the Greek word metanoia which means a change of mind, to turn around, to re-orientate oneself

And baptism by John in the river was an outward sign of that inner choice to change a course of action, submit to God and follow His ways, not their own.... changed lives

If we look back at the Malachi reading we have that lovely picture of a refiner purifying silver I am not a chemist but my understanding is that if you heat to a high temperature a piece of ore, the dross, the dirty elements rise to the top and can be scraped off

This process is repeated over and over again until the pure silver is left and can be used.

God can use all sorts of ways to refine us, to bring the bits of our lives that are not honouring to God to the surface, like the dross, to be removed.

He knows just how much heat to apply and when so that we are not crushed or consumed - even though sometimes it feels as if we might be

And repentance is a part of this refining process and therefore a part of our preparation in Advent.

If we give ourselves time, and genuinely submit to God, then He will prompt us... bring to our minds... the things that we need to repent of. The thoughts or actions or emotions that are not what God would want for us

And then we can make the choice or not to say sorry, and turn our selves around, away from what is not good and back to the holy, righteous one.

That is where we get the declarations from that we use in the baptism service

3 decisions that the parents and godparents, or the person themselves if they are old enough make rejecting evil and turning away from such ways

and then 3 decisions that commit us to turning back towards Christ.

They are big and significant declarations that I always stress to the people I talk to about baptism and take time to explain.

Most of us if not all will have heard them said and many of us will have made those decisions for ourselves, either at our baptism, or that of our children or god children

And I would like us to say them again, in a moment, as part of our preparation this advent.

But before that we are going to have a moment of quiet
I am going to pray the Collect for today
And then after another moment of quiet I will ask us all to stand and make those declarations together

First a moment of quiet

Collect for today

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 God
Amen

Let us stand together

The responses are evident from the questions...

As part of our preparation this advent for the celebration of Jesus' birth and in expectation of His return again one day let us proclaim together

Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?

I reject them

Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?

I renounce them

Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?

I repent of them

Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?

I turn to Christ

Do you submit to Christ as Lord?

I submit to Christ

Do you come to Christ, the way, the truth and the life

I come to Christ