

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Third Sunday of Advent (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: Malachi 3: 1-4; 4: 1-6
Psalm 68: 1-8, (9-20)
Philippians 4: 4-7
Matthew 14: 1-12

The third Sunday of Advent and we encounter our third Old Testament prophet – Isaiah, Micaiah and now Malachi. The latter brings us the first recognisable Advent or Christmas prophecy:

¹ 'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the LORD Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?
For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. (NIV)

The messenger preparing the way, as we know, was John the Baptist and the Lord did suddenly come - in the same period that John was proclaiming the one who would come after him and baptise with the Holy Spirit. John baptised with water, for repentance, but Jesus baptised with the Holy Spirit for power, action and service.

Charles Jennens included the opening words of Malachi 3 in the biblical passages he selected for the libretto presented to George Frederick Handel's when he composed "Messiah".

The librettist produced the following preface to the word-book for the first performance in Dublin on April 13th 1742:

And without Controversy, great is the mystery of Godliness:

God was manifested in the Flesh, justified by the Spirit, seen of Angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:16)

In whom are hid all the Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge. (Colossians 2:3)

It is in the Recitative (No.5) that Malachi 3:1 is coupled with two verses from Haggai (2:6-7):

Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of Hosts; Yet once, a little while, and I will shake the heav'ns, and the earth, the sea, and the dry land; And I will shake, and I will shake all nations, I'll shake the heav'ns, the earth, the sea, the dry land, all nations I'll shake, and the desire of all nations shall come: the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, ev'n the messenger of the covenant, whom you delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.

This is followed immediately by the well known Air based on Malachi 3:2, using the familiar words of the Authorised Version :

But who may abide the day of his coming and who shall stand when he appeareth?.....

For he is like a refiner's fire, who shall stand when he appeareth.....

We remain in Malachi 3 for the Chorus (No8):

And he shall purify the sons of Levi That they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness

Purification is by the refiner's fire – Gold is a 'noble' metal; it reacts with very few other elements and as such is found 'native' in the ground. Silver is more reactive and is often found in compounds with other elements, as an alloy with gold or other metals and just occasionally as 'native' silver. The purification involves heating to high temperatures to melt the metals, the impurities coming to the surface, where they can be scraped away – this is the picture Malachi gives; the Lord is burning the 'dross' from His people.

As the NIV heading to chapter 4 reminds us, "The Day of the Lord" is a time of judgement but it is also a time of covenant renewal:

² **But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays.**

And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves.

³ Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act,' says the LORD Almighty.

⁴ Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵ **See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.**

⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.'

You will remember that, based on this prophecy, the Jewish community at the time of Jesus expected Elijah to return – the prophet did not die but was taken to heaven in a whirlwind - before the coming of the Messiah.

In Matthew 16 we read that Jesus asked his disciples what people were saying about Him. Their reply – "Some say John the Baptist; others say **Elijah**; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

But what about you Jesus asks, who do you say I am? - We remember Peter's declaration that "You are the Christ".

Earlier in Matthew (chapter 11) we read of Jesus suggesting John the Baptist was "the Elijah to come":

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.

¹⁴ **And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.** ¹⁵ **Whoever has ears, let them hear.**

What can we take from this passage in December 2020? It is true Old Testament theology – a small number of righteous people living among a nation who will fall under the Lord’s judgement.

Before we say that things have changed from New Testament times, we are reminded of Paul writing to the Roman Christians regarding “strong” and “weak” brethren: (Chapter 14)

⁵ One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.

⁶ Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.

⁸ If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

⁹ For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. ¹¹ It is written:

“As surely as I live,” says the Lord,

“Every knee will bow before me;

every tongue will acknowledge God.”

¹² **So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.**

We are reminded again that we will be called upon to give an account of our lives by that great hymn of Charles Wesley: “A charge to keep I have”.

Arm me with jealous care,

As in Thy sight to live:

And O Thy servant, Lord, prepare

A strict account to give!

Help me to watch and pray,

And on Thyself rely,

Assured, if I my trust betray,

I shall for ever die.

Paul, in his “Final exhortations” to the Church in Philippi – our short Epistle reading today – speaks of an assurance that is not conveyed in the Old Testament but emphasises, as does Charles Wesley, the need for prayer in all situations.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!

⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. **The Lord is near.**

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

We are familiar with the final verse above in the form of a blessing often used at the end of a worship service:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you, and remain with you always.

The challenge is still there, the knowledge of accounting for the way in which we have lived our lives, but our “new” relationship with the Father, through Jesus, becomes pre-eminent. Let us pray that we may not “betray the trust” that has become part of our lives.

Returning to the Old Testament we find yet again a Psalm of David.

In the first three verses David is making requests:

*“May God arise”; “May his enemies be scattered”; “May you blow them away like smoke”;
“May the wicked perish before God”; but “May the righteous be glad and rejoice before God”.*

In verse 4 there is an instruction to “Sing to God”, “to rejoice before God”.

David then writes of what the Lord has done for His people – “a father to the fatherless”; “a defender of widows”;

“God sets the lonely in families (in ‘bubbles’?); “he leads out the prisoners with singing”.

God is concerned with the welfare of the disadvantaged in society. Is there food for thought here, especially during this time of pandemic where so many are finding themselves in unusual, unexpected and difficult situations?

How have we reacted – as Churches; as individuals? **“And O Thy servant, Lord, prepare a strict account to give!”**

Once again the reading offers an ‘optional’ passage and in this David continues to praise the things the Lord has done. There are 35 verses in the Psalm but a natural break comes at verse 20, where our reading ends.

In verses 19 and 20, David expresses understanding and ‘feelings’ which we might see as fitting more with the relationship with God expressed in the New Testament:

¹⁹ Praise be to the Lord, to God our Saviour, who daily bears our burdens.

²⁰ Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death.

The Gospel reading, from Matthew, concerns the death of John the Baptist. Before looking at the account in more detail, a little background. We first read of a King Herod in the account of the Magi seeking the baby Jesus and the subsequent slaughter of all boys under the age of two. This king was ‘Herod the Great’ and he later divided his large kingdom into four parts, bequeathing (with Roman approval) one part to each of his sons, hence the reference in Matthew 14:1 to **Herod the tetrarch**. This was “Herod Antipas” and he ruled in Galilee – the same ‘Herod’ who is referred to in the events of Holy Week (Luke 23).

The passage we read in Matthew's Gospel concerns some time after the execution of John the Baptist. Herod has heard reports about Jesus - His preaching and His healing ministry. His reaction is to believe that John has risen from the dead. Only two Gospels have the beheading of John and Mark gives us a different slant on the story:

¹⁴ King Herod heard about this, (*Jesus had sent out the twelve*) for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, 'John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.'

¹⁵ **Others said, 'He is Elijah.'** (*see earlier*)

And still others claimed, 'He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.'

¹⁶ But when Herod heard this, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!'

In both Gospels we read why Herod had put John in prison. John had publicly condemned Herod for divorcing his wife Phasaelis (the daughter of King Aretas IV of Nabatea) and 'consorting' with Herodias, the wife of Herod's half-brother, Philip II (another of the four tetrarchs). Before Herod Antipas could 'marry' Herodias **she had to divorce her former husband** and this was not permitted by law in the male dominated Jewish society of the time, only a husband could initiate divorce proceedings.

The attitude of Herod towards the imprisoned John is surprisingly different in the accounts given by Matthew and by Mark:

Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.

(Matthew 14:5)

For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison.

He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married.

¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'

¹⁹ So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to,

²⁰ because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man.

When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

(Mark 6:17-20)

Both accounts make it clear that the prime mover in the execution of John the Baptist was Herodias – as Mark expresses it, "She nursed a grudge against John".

The opportunity came when Salome (daughter of Herodias and Philip) danced at a banquet (Mark tells us it was given for his high officials, military leaders and prominent Galilean citizens to celebrate the tetrach's birthday). Herod was so entranced by her performance that, in front of all his guests, he made a rash and intractable promise. Salome and her mother demanded the head of John the Baptist on a dish; to be delivered there at the banquet. Herod had no way out; he had made a rash promise.

What follows is recorded near identically in Matthew and in Mark:

⁹ The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted ¹⁰ and had John beheaded in the prison.

¹¹ His head was brought in on a dish and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother.

¹² John's disciples came and took his body and buried it.

Then they went and told Jesus.

Matthew goes on to tell us that "*When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place*".

The crowd however have other ideas – they follow on foot, catch up with Jesus, which results in His healing the sick and leads on to the "Feeding of the Five Thousand".

John must have known (a) the unpopularity and (b) the mortal danger to himself, of the message he delivered about Herod and Herodias yet proclaimed faithfully - "The Word of the Lord".

Are we challenged by this story to think about our own proclamation of God's Word? - The offer of redemption, Peace of Mind, Guidance, etc. in the person of Jesus Christ.

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
Announces that the Lord is nigh:
Awake and hearken, for he brings
Glad tidings from the King of Kings!

Then cleansed be every life from sin;
Make straight the way for God within,
And let us all our hearts prepare
For Christ to come and enter there.

For You are our salvation, Lord,
Our refuge, and our great reward;
Without Your grace we waste away
Like flowers that wither and decay.

To heal the sick stretch out Your hand,
And bid the fallen sinner stand;
Shine forth, and let Your light restore
Earth's own true loveliness once more.

To God the Son all glory be
Whose advent sets His people free,
Whom, with the Father, we adore,
And Holy Spirit, evermore.

John Chandler