

## **Sermon for Sunday 5 December**

### **Second Sunday of Advent**

**Malachi 3: 1 – 4; Philippians 1: 3 – 11; Luke 3: 1 – 6**

#### **Preparing our Hearts to Receive Christ**

Advent is a season of waiting, and last week in our sermon we were thinking about how to wait well.

As we wait for the celebration of Jesus' birth, Advent reminds us that we're also waiting for the return of Jesus at the end of time. Our reading from Philippians today refers twice to "the day of Christ", meaning the day when Jesus returns. We believe He will return in glory and in judgement to bring all things to fulfilment and to deal decisively with all that causes sin and suffering in our world. Reading or watching the news of the past week we might well feel that He can't come soon enough!

This week we especially remember the prophets. The prophets were always trying to

turn the hearts of God's people back to God and away from their sinful ways. So – How do we prepare our hearts to receive Christ?

Today's readings give us some help us with this.

Malachi is the last of the Old Testament prophets. Near the beginning of his book we read these words, "I have loved you, says the Lord. But you say, How have you loved us?" the relationship between God and His people is not in good repair. Malachi urges God's people to be faithful to Him in times when there were social abuses, indifferent worship and even idolatry. The problem was that God did not appear to be acting in judgement on these behaviours. Not an easy situation for a prophet to speak into. But Malachi says God will come, and He will be like a refiner's fire used to burn away the impurities from silver or gold. Or fuller's soap – presumably made from fuller's earth – a Woburn Sands product!. A fuller's job was to cleanse and whiten cloth – a smelly job – by removing dirt and oils from the wool so that the cloth was pure white.

Because God loves His people, He is surely going to take measures to cleanse their hearts so that their worship will be pleasing to Him once more. Being refined is not a comfortable process. But God is going to take the initiative.

Moving to our reading from the Gospel of Luke we meet John the Baptist, sent by God at a very particular moment in history to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He comes in fulfilment of the words of the prophet Isaiah to prepare the way of the Lord, so that all flesh will see the salvation of God. (Luke 3: 4, 6). God is taking the initiative again, but in a new and decisive way. So John preaches to the people, telling them to turn their lives around and ask forgiveness for their sins. Then their hearts will be prepared to receive the One who is to come.

Fast-forward again to Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul writes to them from prison, as he cannot visit. They have already received Christ and come to faith. They are part of a Christian fellowship, and one that seems to have

been especially deeply loved by Paul. Perhaps because, like Paul, they had suffered for their faith. Paul is confident that they will continue to grow in faith, and he prays for them. Here is what he prays: "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight <sup>10</sup> to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, <sup>11</sup> having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." (Philippians 1: 9 – 11)

Paul prays for them to develop real, genuine, Christ-filled love. As one commentator puts it "Not a love that is sentimental and easy and grins at the wrong time; not a love that shrinks from truth-telling and tough engagements; but a love that is joined to knowing and understanding, to probing and discerning, to putting itself to the test in real-life situations and making moral choices in matters that count."<sup>1</sup> It takes courage, prayer and the grace

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<sup>1</sup> *Interpretation Commentary Philippians* – Fred B Craddock, p21

of God changing us deep down to develop that kind of love and to be prepared to take the risk of living and loving in that way.

But we recognise it when we encounter it, don't we? When a friend has the courage and discernment to tell us lovingly what is true about ourselves or about our work rather than what we might like to hear.

Or when Christian love, joined with a strong sense of what is right prompts someone to start a new movement or a new charity. The Trussell Trust was founded in 1997 by Carol and Paddy Henderson based on a legacy left by Carol's mother, Betty Trussell. Their initial projects were based in Bulgaria, but in 2000, Paddy received a call from a mother in Salisbury, who was struggling to afford food and faced sending her children to bed hungry.

Paddy investigated data on poverty and deprivation in the UK and found that significant numbers of people faced going hungry as a result of a sudden crisis. So he started a Foodbank in his garden shed and garage in

Salisbury, providing three days' emergency food to local people in crisis. The Trust now supports a network of food banks across the UK, supported by thousands of volunteers – including our own at Milton Keynes.

That is certainly a harvest of righteousness that gives glory and praise to God.

So as we continue our waiting this Advent, let us ask God to prepare our hearts. Purifying them. Helping us to turn away from all that's unhelpful, so that we seek His forgiveness. Pouring upon us the overflowing love of Christ so that everything we are and everything we do brings glory to God.

Amen

*Revd Diana Young*