

**Malachi 3:1-4 The Coming Messenger  
Advent 2 Sunday 5th December 2021  
Rev. Susan Pickering**

Gathering of the People of God

**Organ Prelude**

**Welcome & Notices**

**Centring Prayer**

Let us prepare our hearts and minds for worship,  
let us rest in the silence, breathing in the presence of God...

**Processional Hymn**

**Tis 275 Hail to the Lord's Anointed (v1-4)**

**Call to Worship**

Blessed is the God of Israel  
for God has looked favourably on the people  
and redeemed them.

**Let us gather and praise God**

God spoke through the holy prophets from old,  
that we would be saved from our  
enemies and from the hand of all  
who hate us.

**Let us worship God**

By the tender mercy of God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
Let us fall silent  
and prepare to worship God

**Acknowledgment of Country**

We recognise that God created heaven and earth, the sea and the sky, and all that is in them.

***This land is Holy Ground***

As we gather we acknowledge the traditional custodians, elders, past, present and emerging

***We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.***

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**Introit**

**Lighting the Advent Candle**

A Candle burns,  
The sign of peace.  
We gather together,  
We listen together,  
We wait for the arrival of the kingdom of peace.

***Spirit of God reveal the peaceable kingdom.***

**Hymn “Light a Candle Bright and Tall”**

**Prayer of Thanksgiving & Confession**

God of Advent  
we come to you in our waiting,  
Giving thanks that you offer shelter to the whole of creation  
under the same wondrous sky, with a roof of stars.  
We give thanks for your love that shatters the boundaries we build.

As we gather in this time of advent,  
Reflecting on the light that enters the world,  
And so we must confess the darkness that is exposed in that light.

We live in a world of obscene wealth and of scandalous poverty.  
A world of greed and a world of lack,  
A world of luxury and world that for many feels like hell.

We live in a world where freedom of speech protects words and actions of hate and harm,  
We live in a world where people scramble for safety only to be met by closed doors.  
We live in a world ruled with clenched fists rather than open hands.

We confess that in our human frailty we have accepted and perpetuated divisions, inequality and injustice.  
God forgive us,  
May we shatter the barriers we have participated in building,  
May we break the chains that keep people bound,  
May we open our eyes to see your image in all who we meet.

Send your Spirit upon us,  
May She help us to open the gates,  
To shatter barriers,

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To roll away stones,  
To heal divisions,  
To share bread with our siblings around the table,  
In the name of the Coming One we pray, Amen

**Words of Assurance**

It's Advent, a time of hope, peace, joy and love. A time where we prepare to celebrate God with us – receive the freeing words of Jesus the Christ, knowing and trusting that we are set free and loved.

***All Glory and Honour and Thanks be to God.***

**Doxology                      The Kingdom of God**

**Service of the Word**

**Readings**

<b>1st reading</b>	<b>Malachi 3:1 - 4</b>	<b>The Coming Messenger</b>
<b>2nd reading</b>	<b>Luke 3:1 - 6</b>	<b>The Proclamation of John the Baptist</b>

This is the Living Word

***Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.***

**Anthem**

**Sermon**

Here we are in the second week of advent. The Luke reading is a fairly familiar reading which begins with a list of dignitaries and power holders both political and religious. This followed by the proclamation of John the Baptist calling people to a baptism of repentance for forgiveness and a call to prepare the way of the Lord - no sorry that's not the sermon!

This morning I'm going to focus on the brief reading from Malachi chapter 3, the first three verses of which may be familiar to some as it appears in Handel's Messiah<sup>1</sup> beyond this familiarity we need some context. Malachi is the closing book of what is known as the Book of Twelve<sup>2</sup> which consists of the 12 minor prophets beginning at Hosea through to, obviously, Malachi. Most scholars agree that this minor prophet spoke in the second temple period and was addressing a post-exilic

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.toledosymphony.com/clientuploads/20192020season/TSOinHD/2020\\_0412\\_Messiah\\_Lyrics.pdf](https://www.toledosymphony.com/clientuploads/20192020season/TSOinHD/2020_0412_Messiah_Lyrics.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Redditt

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community of Jews who had returned from exile.<sup>3</sup> The dating of the text is identified as being between 515 BCE and the careers of Ezra and Nehemiah so around 456 B.C.E.<sup>4</sup>

If we begin by looking back we begin with the destruction of Jerusalem and subsequent exile which marked a great turning point for the history of Israel, it's existence ended along with all it's institutions in which corporate life had expressed itself.<sup>5</sup> In this light we need to consider the socio-historical context of the Judean people under the control of the Persian Empire. The community would've been diverse and made up of those who had survived battle, disease, survivors of those executed,<sup>6</sup> those who had moved and intermarried<sup>7</sup> and of course the returning exiles. It's the second temple period and it's suggested that while standing the second temple in no way rivalled the magnificence of the former, and even in it's completion, to this point had failed to usher in the Messianic era.<sup>8</sup> The setting of our text has been described as a time that was; "disillusioning, disheartening, and [a time of] decay."<sup>9</sup> Those arriving home did so with visions of a new kingdom of God, a new temple which would be the symbol of God's residence among God's people, restored trade, escape from the enemies of God - alas none of these expectations were fulfilled.<sup>10</sup> The result of such overwhelming disappointment was a distrust in God,<sup>11</sup> and a skepticism of God's justice.<sup>12</sup>

So enter the scene the prophet we know as Malachi with his oracle consisting of a series of question and answer speeches, there are 22 questions all in a book of only 55 verses (yes I counted). His oracle addresses a double audience, both priests and the wider community. Malachi begins by addressing the corruption of the priesthood, their polluted offerings, offerings that are either lame or sick or taken by violence.<sup>13</sup> Malachi then turns to address the broader community, the distrusting and the skeptical, for their profanation of the covenant, summing it up in the final verse of chapter two; "You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, "How

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<sup>3</sup> Ayres in Feasting on the Word

<sup>4</sup> Redditt,

<sup>5</sup> Bright

<sup>6</sup> Bright

<sup>7</sup> Gray

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<sup>9</sup> Professor G. A. Smith in Gray

<sup>10</sup> Gray

<sup>11</sup> Gray

<sup>12</sup> Ayres in Feasting on the Word

<sup>13</sup> NRSV Malachi 1:1-2:9

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have we wearied him?" By saying; "All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of Justice?"<sup>14</sup>

If we extend our reading for today by just one more verse we come to a 'vice list' and we're given examples of some of the practices within the community where justice will be swift, that would be; against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, those who swear falsely, those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien and do not fear me.<sup>15</sup>

Placing broader context around the reading always helps us to understand better and reduces the risk of the text being misused. The framework of our reading is ultimately a justice framework with Malachi warning the people that God is sending a messenger to prepare the way.<sup>16</sup> As the prophet continues we can sense a bit of sarcasm, almost a divine eye roll, with the words 'the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight.' Who the messenger will be is left vague, but whoever it is will enforce the covenant with powerful means 'like a refiner's fire and fullers' soap.'<sup>17</sup>

In the mentioning of the covenant it seems that Malachi is reminiscing 'the good old days' which so many of us do at times. The people have forgotten what God's desires are and their questions of 'where is the justice of God', seem to smack with self-righteousness and arrogance, never-the-less Malachi is now warning them it's coming. If we consider the covenants, which are the backbone of the Hebrew Scriptures, they're about mutual relationships.<sup>18</sup>

We all know we can't go back and change the past, but perhaps if principles of past, in relation to justice, relationship and love are lived out in the present perhaps fundamental change may be possible.<sup>19</sup> The refiners fire and soap are no ordinary fire and soap, it's characterised as extreme heat and in todays terms an acid, all sounds very violent to me, not pleasant at all. In relation to gold and silver the refining process is a process to remove impurities and strengthen the substance.<sup>20</sup> In one commentary I read it's suggested that the refining process is considered

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<sup>14</sup> NRSV Malachi 2:10-17

<sup>15</sup> NRSV Malachi 3:5

<sup>16</sup> NRSV Malachi 3:1

<sup>17</sup> NRSV Malachi 3:2

<sup>18</sup> NRSV Genesis 8:20-9:17; Genesis 12,15,17; Exodus 19-24; 2 Samuel 7

<sup>19</sup> Ayres in Feasting on the Word

<sup>20</sup> Bauer-Levesque in Feasting on the Word

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complete by a silversmith only when they're able to observe their own image reflected in the mirror-like surface.<sup>21</sup> So this process is about restoration.

Of course underlying all of this are the undertones and overtones of judgement, while in our Gospel reading we have John the Baptist calling people to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin<sup>22</sup> the prophet makes no such call. The reality is that none of us, if we're completely honest, are particularly pleased about the idea of judgement, yet judgement ought not be purely understood as punitive, even if we think there are some deserving of punishment. This text and every other text is grounded in understanding God's judgement and God's justice, we're fortunate enough to have the life and ministry of Jesus to help us see that for what it is and that is that God's schema of justice is restorative rather than retributive.<sup>23</sup> While the refining process doesn't sound too pleasant perhaps it is a process, if we consider the silversmith process, that restores Imageo Dei.

The prophetic texts are often uncomfortable and can make us squirm a little, but let's face it Jesus and his disciples didn't have a New Testament tucked in their robes, they had the Hebrew Scriptures and words of the prophets. At Christmas we want to look no further than the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, and rightly so, thing is it is also about looking forward to the parousia, the second coming. With this in mind I must agree with Bonhoeffer in his advent sermon of 1928 in Barcelona when he said; 'It's very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming, so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God...we've become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us.'<sup>24</sup>

We seem to hold onto only the parts of our faith that are comfortable and warm and forget the heart of discipleship and the heart of the kingdom which operates on a different economy. I have no doubt about the love of God, but I also have no doubt about what that means and the reality is we all fall short, quite often because we are seduced by and enmeshed in the rhetoric of the current economy of the world.

While my aim is not to instil guilt or leave people feeling bad, I feel to remain silent is to ignore the significance of this season. Do we consider only the cost to our pockets in our purchases or the cost to people and planet - the whole of creation? Do we passively accepting military imperialism in our world? Do we support systems of retributive justice rather than restorative justice? Do we remain silent on

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<sup>21</sup> Ayres in Feasting on the Word

<sup>22</sup> NRSV Luke 3:1

<sup>23</sup> Ayres in Feasting on the Word

<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer in Kelly & Nelson, 1995

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issues of discrimination and oppression? Do we turn a blind eye to those who suffer at the hands of poor theology?

We might not like the questions, we might not want to hear them, we may certainly not want to reflect on them as we approach Christmas, but that said we must, because the Word for which we wait overlooked political and religious rulers and went right to the edge of acceptability, the kingdom of which he spoke was scandalous, because it shattered boundaries that divided.<sup>25</sup> The bottom line is we wait for so much more than an innocent baby, we wait for the Word who dared to go to the margins of society and toe to toe with the authorities to speak words of truth and love as he proclaimed the good news, to the poor, the rejected, the excluded. The Word became flesh and handed the baton to us.

**Prayer**

Holy One of the wilderness way, your Word calls us on the unbending road and to the raw centre of our world. We call upon your Spirit to fill us with the vibrant life of Jesus the Christ, enabling us to continue the work of the new kingdom and empowering us to speak words of truth that reveal the good news of the season. Amen

**Hymn              CH 291 When out of Poverty**

**Prayer for Leaving Family**

**Prayers for the People**

**Sacrament of the Lord's Supper**

**Peace**

**Communion Hymn CH 510 Jesus Calls Us Here**

**Communion**

- **Invitation**
  
- **Great Prayer of Thanksgiving**

God be with you

***And also with you***

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<sup>25</sup> Hollyday in Preaching the Word on [sojo.net](http://sojo.net)

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Lift up your hearts  
**We lift them to God**

Let us give thanks to the God of love  
**It is right to give our thanks and praise**

It is indeed right to give you our thanks and praise, O God...

...Therefore, with our hearts lifted high,  
we praise you with the faithful of every time and place,  
Joining with the whole creation in the eternal hymn:

- **Sanctus**
- **Institution**
- **Invocation & Lord's Prayer**

Holy God...

...And as a sign of sacred unity, we join together in the prayer;  
**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done,**  
**on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins,**  
**as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial**  
**and deliver us from evil.**  
**For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.**

- **Breaking the Bread**

**Prayer after Communion**

Sending Forth the People of God

**Hymn            TiS 158 God Has Spoken**

**Words of Mission & Blessing**

Let us leave this place  
Open to the reality of our call and God's ways  
Let us find peace to wait in the uncomfortable spaces,  
Let us find strength to journey to the margins,  
Let us dare to wait on the edge.

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May the blessing of God, the outrageous one, continue to comfort and disturb us,  
May the blessing of Jesus, powerful in his vulnerability, be born in us afresh.  
And may the blessing of the Holy Spirit, ungraspable yet longed for, birth within us  
the desire to see justice and peace upon all the earth. Amen

**Shalom to You**

**Postlude**

**Sources**

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