

Advent 2 – 9th December 2012

Theme: “Those heralding the coming of Jesus”

Readings: Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6

Text: “A voice of one calling in the desert,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make every path straight for
him.’” (Luke 3:4b)

Introduction

Here we are on the second Sunday of Advent with two different but similar passages calling the people to change their ways because their God is coming and people may be found wanting.

Malachi is the last book of our Old Testament and we’ll look at the setting and the background of the reading in a moment. However the message is clear – with the coming of the Lord the people and particularly their religious leaders will be purified like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. A similar message comes from John the Baptist in the Lucan Gospel set for today. We read, “He went into all the country around Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Luke 3:3

Let us take a closer look at these passages.

Malachi 3:1-4

The name Malachi literally means ‘my messenger’ and he spoke his words to the Israel nation after they had been allowed home by the Persian king, Artaxerxes. Probably it was in the period after 433BC when Nehemiah had returned to Persia and had left the people to fend for themselves and they went astray from their faith, both the people and the priests.

The people had several discouraging factors that caused them to lose faith:

- their land remained but a small backwater of the Persian Empire
- the glorious future announced by the prophets for the nation had not eventuated
- their God had not come into the new Temple they had built with the majesty and power they thought would happen
- they doubted God’s covenant of love
- they no longer trusted in God’s justice
- the Jews of the restored community began to lose hope

It is into this scenario that Malachi speaks his words.

He rebukes the people for:

- their lack of faith
- their doubt of God’s love

It is then that Malachi speaks of the Lord coming like a ‘refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. There is the imagery of cleansing, removing the dross off the top of the refined silver or the dirt out of the clothing – both to cleanse and make us acceptable to God, that we may be pure offerings to our Lord. With this in mind we then turn to the Gospel for today.

Luke 3:1-6

Here Luke sets the scene historically to begin with. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar..." means the year is around 25-26 AD.

Obviously for Luke he wanted this to be known as a factual time in history that could be checked. It was not some made up account but in fact at a certain time in history that John the Baptist began his ministry.

The second point to make is "that the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert." vs 2b

This is in line with what happened to many of the prophets. Also for Jesus, to confirm his call he spent time in the desert affirming that call.

John came with the message of a baptism of repentance. John's baptism represented a change of heart, which includes sorrow for sin and a determination to lead a holy life.

Then there is the direct quote from Isaiah 40:3-5 to link the ministry of John with the prophets of old. It is also a description of the form of ministry John is conducting. The imagery used is that of preparing for a king who is making a journey from a distant country. The roads he was to travel would be upgraded for his journey to make it an easier trip. Similarly, John's ministry was a preparation morally and spiritually to prepare the hearts of the people to receive their Messiah, their spiritual king. Hence the focus on repentance and forgiveness of sin.

This ministry was to be made known to 'all mankind', which literally means Jews and Gentiles. This is a major theme within Luke's Gospel. Salvation is for all people and not simply the Jews.

Reflection for Advent

As we enter into the Advent season there is the call upon us to fulfil the preparations of the season, which is to prepare for the Christ child again and to recognise this Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

This means taking seriously the readings that remind us that not all is well in our personal lives, the life of the church locally, nationally and internationally, and to seek forgiveness afresh as we await the birth of our Saviour this Christmas. Hence Advent is a season of reflection, of waiting, of spiritual growth, of hope in the future as we seek to be God's faithful people.

Prayer

Come, Lord Jesus, not to fulfil our desire for you, but rather in accordance with your desire for us. Be truthful with us and then give us the grace to be able to endure your truth. Stir up in us fresh desire to meet your expectations for us.

Purify us and transform us into the people whom you would have us be.
Amen.