

St Marc, Grenoble
Sunday 5th December 2021 (Advent 2)
Malachi 3: 1 - 4
Benedictus (The Song of Zechariah Luke 1:68-79)
Luke 3: 1 - 6
'Prepare the Way'

Good Morning, Welcome and thank you for joining us, whether you are here, in St Marc's or on Zoom.

Pray

Are you ready for Christmas??

What are the highlights of Christmas preparations for you?

When my children were young, there was always great excitement about putting up the Christmas Tree and the Christmas decorations. That was the signal, in our house, that Christmas was coming.

But, as a pastor, Christmas takes on a completely different perspective. It is, of course, just one of our busiest times of year; so, any personal preparations have to be very early, or right at the last minute.

Sadly, if I'm not very careful, the real meaning and joy of Christmas can be lost, amidst the busyness and hard work.

Advent is supposed to be a time of reflective preparation for Christmas; but, what do you think it is, that we are, or should be, preparing for??

Wait for responses ...

OK. Now let's have a closer look at our readings; and see if they help us at all with the idea of Advent, and preparation.

As you probably know, Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament; although its position in the Bible is probably not in the correct time order.

It was, almost certainly, written between four and five hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

Very little is known about the prophet Malachi, if indeed that was his name.

The word Malachi actually means ‘My Messenger’ and, although it could have been a name, some scholars think the book was probably named from the opening phrase of this reading: “See, I will send my messenger”.

It’s also believed that the prophet died young. In fact is quite likely he was stoned to death, because of his extremely critical and challenging words!

That’s not really surprising, because what he had to say was not at all complementary to the people of Israel – especially the priests! Dislike of comment, or criticism, of the way we conduct our faith is nothing new!

But I rather hope the stoning of prophets has gone out of fashion in South Eastern France!! What’s that phrase? “Don’t shoot the messenger!”

Or, as Elton John famously reworded it, – “Don’t shoot me, I’m only the piano player!”

In the first couple of chapters of the book, Malachi had challenged the people of Judah, particularly the priests, about the way they were conducting their duties, especially the way they were dealing with sacrifices.

He accused them of being abusive and hypocritical in the way they conducted their relationships with God. And now, he was warning them to be prepared for the Lord’s arrival – preceded by ‘My Messenger’ who will prepare the way.

That reminded me of Isaiah 40: 3 – 5. Let me read it to you from The Message:

Thunder in the desert! "Prepare for God's arrival!
Make the road straight and smooth, a highway fit for our God.
Fill in the valleys, level off the hills Smooth out the ruts, clear out the rocks.
Then God's bright glory will shine and everyone will see it.
Yes. Just as God has said."

In Old Testament times, when a King was planning a visit to his people, messengers were sent out in advance to tell the people to get the roads repaired and ready, and to make appropriate preparations – if the people had any sense, that’s exactly what they did; or punishment would be meted out.

It seems that little has changed; because whenever the British Queen plans to go on a Royal visit, there is a team of people who go out, in advance, to

tell people what preparations are required to be made; then, they go out again before the visit, to ensure the preparations have been correctly made.

But, Malachi wasn't talking about preparing for the visit of an earthly King; he was telling people to prepare for a far greater and more serious event: the arrival of God; the God of all! - Justice was coming He was warning them that, if they didn't get their act together, God would do the job far more thoroughly Himself.

He warned that God will be like a launderer, scrubbing them with strong soap – just like my Grandma used to say “a good old dose of carbolic”.

Or like a refiner, who uses a white hot fire to refine silver and gold – which burns out all the impurities.

The prophecy Malachi was bringing made him very unpopular; of course, it was not of his own volition; because Malachi was speaking on behalf of God.

But, poor Malachi was given short shrift – nobody seemed willing to take notice of the dire warnings he was offering. And, surprise, surprise, nothing happened for at least four hundred years. The line to God went dead! ...

The Jewish people complained God had forsaken them; or forgotten them!

Then, suddenly, along came John the Baptist ... And, what was he shouting about?:

Thunder in the desert! "Prepare for God's arrival!
Make the road smooth and straight!
Every ditch will be filled in, Every bump smoothed out,
The detours straightened out, All the ruts paved over.
Everyone will be there to see The parade of God's salvation."

A familiar cry?? And, what happened??

Maybe several thousand, people turned out to be baptised in the River Jordan;

But, those in authority didn't like what John was proclaiming; and, in the long run, poor old John the Baptist lost his head;

Despite the crystal clear messianic signs, most people – especially the priests and rulers, were determined to prove Jesus wasn't Messiah at all.

Jesus, who gave up His Royal Throne in heaven, and came to earth to draw close to His chosen people, was crucified by the people He came to save.

And yet ... isn't it totally remarkable that our gracious and wonderful God; in all His Majesty, His splendour and all His power, made use of that barbaric act, as the ultimate sacrifice to redeem us, His chosen people – once and for all!!

As children, when we played hide and seek, we used to count to a certain number, and then shout: ‘Coming, ready or not!’

Thinking about our readings this morning, first Malachi’s prophecy; and, second about John the Baptist, calling in the wilderness ... think about it ...
Maybe God is counting right now?!

But, whatever is happening, we need to be preparing ourselves, our hearts and our minds, to be ready, in advance, for the Lord’s coming.

So, as I close, ask yourself two questions:

First - “**What** are you preparing for, this Advent?” Are you ready to meet your Saviour?

Second - “**How** are you going to prepare yourself, this Advent - what are you going to do to prepare your head, your heart, your mind and your soul?”

(At the Heart of Christmas app?)

Let's pray...

Gracious and loving Lord God, help us to be amazed at the wonders of your continued patience and grace with us.

Help us to know your presence with us, this Advent, and to prepare to welcome you, into our hearts, our minds and our lives this Christmas.

Help us, to be ready for your return, whenever you choose to come.

And help us, Lord, to prepare the paths of our lives for your arrival; filling in the ditches and ruts of our indifference, so that we are ready to dance for joy, in the celebration parade of Your salvation **Amen.**