

"Advent 2 – the Prophets Foretold"

6th December 2009

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Readings:

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79 (Benedictus)

Luke 3:1-6:

Sermon

Last week was the first Sunday in Advent, when traditionally we remember how God gave promises to the Patriarchs ... the fathers of the Jewish nation ... about the coming of the Saviour. This week, we turn our attention to the prophets ... the holy men though whom God spoke to his people.

The prophets brought a challenge to the people, to live according to God's law. They brought a rebuke when the people fell into disobedience and sin. They brought warnings of coming judgment, both in this life and in the life to come.

... and they brought, also, a message of encouragement and hope ... enabling God's people to look forward to the time when he would send the Messiah to save them.

... and this is our focus this morning.

As we look into God's promises through the prophets, which were fulfilled by the life and ministry of Jesus, we should be encouraged to go trusting in the promises made to us which have yet to be fulfilled, as God works out his plan and purpose through the whole of history, until Jesus comes again. This, after all, is the true message of Advent.

So ... who were these prophets, and what was their message?

Let's start with Malachi. (Malachi 3:1-4)

Malachi's name means 'my messenger', but not too much is known about him. He lived around 450 years before Jesus, after some of the exiles had returned from Babylon with Ezra, given permission and resources to rebuild the temple by Cyrus, King of Persia, who had conquered Babylon.

Times were hard, and the people were disillusioned. They had become casual in their worship and were not living by God's standards. Malachi gives them a bit of a roasting in chapter 4, because they are effectively robbing God by not bringing their tithes and offerings to the temple.

We might reflect on the fact that this doesn't sound all that different to our situation today.

People today are disillusioned ... many are casual in their attitude to worshipping God ... many treat worship as an optional activity for those Sundays when they don't have something better to do ... and the moral standards of the nation are at a pretty low point.

Certainly there are issues about how much we give to God, when finances not just in the

local Church but across the Diocese and the national Church are in a critical state. Malachi might have had similar things to say to us today as he said to Jerusalem then.

So what message does God give through Malachi to his dispirited people?

Not, at this moment, a rebuke for their sloppy devotions and half-hearted worship – that comes a bit later on – but instead a message of hope (Malachi 3:1):

“See, 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.”

Here at last is real hope for a nation which has suffered the disgrace and degradation of exile, and for the remnant who have returned to a devastated city and a ruined temple. Their national pride has been broken ... as a punishment for their sins ... but there is hope of restoration on the way. *“The Lord ... whom you desire, will come.”*

Good news! ... great news! ... but good news with a bit of a sting in the tail!

Firstly, don't forget we are talking about a prophet giving God's word to his people 450 years before Jesus came. Nothing was going to radically change just yet, and they needed to wait patiently, in faith, for a time which none of them would see for themselves.

Secondly, the next three verses indicate that his coming will not be comfortable. God plans to sort out his people ... to refine them and purify them. He will restore them to a right relationship with himself, 'as in former years', but the process of refinement will be a rigorous one. Even with the coming of Jesus, that wasn't going to happen overnight. The refining process would go on long after Jesus' time ... indeed; it will go on until he returns in his glory at the end of the age.

Now let's look at the Benedictus ... or the Song of Zechariah, which we read together.

The beginning of Luke's gospel gives an account of Zechariah, the old priest, who was chosen by lot to go into the temple ... into Holy of Holies, the innermost, holiest place ... to burn incense on the altar. This was a great privilege, which happened just once a year ... and would be the high point of many a priests' career.

Zechariah was already old ... and his wife 'well on in years' and they were childless. Since children were seen as a blessing from the Lord, to be childless was something of a disgrace ... often seen as a sign of God's judgment ... but Zechariah and Elizabeth his wife were known to be holy and righteous people. Their childlessness was a mystery.

So Zechariah went into the temple to burn incense ... and when he emerged to face the crowd, he was literally speechless. The people rightly supposed that something dramatic had occurred ... that he had seen a vision.

While he was at the altar, an angel of the Lord had appeared to Zechariah, and told him that he and Elizabeth were to have a son ... and that they were to call him John. Zechariah was understandably amazed, and questioned how this could be, since they were both old ... and as a result of his unbelief, the old man was struck dumb until the birth of his son, who they did indeed name John ... at which point the old priest's speech was restored.

Like 1:67 says, after John was born:

"His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:"

Now, what we have read together as the Benedictus is Zechariah's outpouring of praise and thankfulness at the miraculous birth of his son, whom the angel told him would be no ordinary boy.

As the prophets had prophesied all those long years ago, and in answer to the longing of his people over the centuries, God had sent his messenger to prepare the way for the arrival of his Son.

... and here he was!

John was the 'forerunner' prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures ... and as he pours out his thanks and praise to God, in his excitement and enthusiastic faith, Zechariah thanks God not only for his Son, but for the Saviour for whom John was to prepare the way.

Zechariah refers to a number of the prophecies which pointed forward across the centuries to this momentous moment. Woven into the Benedictus you can pick out threads from these.

(In v70) Jeremiah 23:5f clearly refers to the Lord Jesus himself, who was already forming in Mary's womb as Zechariah and Elizabeth celebrated the birth of their son:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord our Righteousness."

(In v72) Micah 7:20 points back to God's promise to Abraham, which Zechariah was now seeing come to fruition through both John and Jesus:

"You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago."

(Also in v72) Ezekiel 16:60 remembers the covenant which God made with his people:

"I will remember the covenant I made with you the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you."

(In v73) Genesis 22:16-18 recalls the oath God swore to Abraham after he intervened to stop Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac in obedience to God's instructions:

"I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore ... all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me."

(In v76) Malachi 3:1 refers directly to John, who God was preparing to be a messenger to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus:

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me."

(In v78) Malachi 4:2a points us to Jesus, the 'sun of righteousness', who would bring not only physical and spiritual healing, but healing of the broken relationship between God and his people:

"..for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings."

(In v79) Isaiah 9:2 ,, , perhaps one of the most familiar of Advent readings, speaks of Jesus as a great light, shining in the darkness, bringing life and hope to the world:

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

Zechariah's Song is a beautiful outpouring of praise, and a wonderful reminder of the faithfulness of God which the old priest was seeing fulfilled not only in his family, but also in his nations, and for the whole of creation.

John had come, and Jesus was coming, and Zechariah receives by faith that which is still to come to pass. Although Jesus was yet to be born, his thankfulness is summed up in his opening sentence:

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people."

Our Gospel reading from Luke 3 moves us on about thirty years.

John's particular calling was not an easy one. It led him to live a strange life, out in the wilderness, preaching to all who would hear him, and baptising repentant people in the muddy waters of the Jordan.

John's task was to call people to examine themselves, and turn from their sins, in preparation for the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Many came to him ... and some of those who were John's disciples in time became disciples of Jesus.

There is a lot of detail in the first two verses of this chapter, telling us which of Herod the Great's equally charming sons had taken on which share of the kingdom. It may seem unnecessary detail, but it puts John's own ministry, and that of Jesus, firmly into a historical context.

John preached a baptism of repentance in the Judean countryside, and the people flocked to him. Some would have recognised him as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 40:3-5):

"A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.""

You have to be very careful with prophecy. It often uses symbolic language, and needs to be interpreted with care. It is the nature of prophecy that much of it speaks into more than one timeframe.

- Often when the prophets spoke, some of what they said referred to the immediate future, and those living would see it come true.
- Some of what they said spoke of the more distant future, and naturally most of

- that referred to the Lord Jesus himself.
- Some of what they said spoke of the far future ... of the time when Jesus will return at the end of time.

John was called by God to prepare the way for Jesus ... to get people ready for his coming. He was faithful to his calling, and numbered some of Jesus' disciples among his followers. John did what he was called to do, stepping back from the limelight when Jesus appeared .. pointing others to the Saviour. His faithfulness and boldness cost him his life, beheaded in Herod's dungeon on the whim of Herod's wife.

But the task of preparing the way for Jesus is also ours.

Not only the prophets, but Jesus himself were absolutely clear about this ... that at the end of this present age, God decides the time is right to bring the world as we know it to an end, and to establish his glorious kingdom with a renewed earth and heavens.

The prophet Micah identified Bethlehem as the place of Jesus' birth ... and Jesus as God's rightful ruler. So it is in Micah that we find today's **Memory Verse [OHT]:**

"But you, Bethlehem Ephratha, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (Micah 5:2)

Rehearse Memory Verse!

Jesus is coming again ... not this time as a vulnerable child, sleeping in a poor manger in a backwater town in the Middle East ... but instead as our glorious Lord, arriving in all his majesty with all his holy angels ... when every eye will see him and every knee will bow before him.

This is what Advent is about ... 'the arrival' ... anticipating the time of his coming.

Our task, like John's, is to prepare people for his coming. We are called by God to tell the story of his first coming, and to announce that he is coming again. We are to declare the Good News that Jesus has come to save us, and that all are welcome to come to him.

Will we do this during this Advent period?

Will we take advantage of the opportunities?

Will we stand up and be counted as those who belong to Jesus?

Will we take seriously our responsibility as a community of believers to call others to come with us on the adventure of faith?

Will we do our best to live authentic Christian lives which will help to draw other people in?

... so that through the work of God's Church here in Sherwood, people who do not yet know Jesus may come to put their trust in him, to receive the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of everlasting life in the presence of God?