

## Sermon for Gings Advent 2 – 6th December 2015

Readings: Malachi 3: 1-4

Luke 3: 1-6

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Carolyn and I say to each other every year that we love the season of Advent. I'm sure Carolyn loves it for all the right reasons, but for my part, I think what happens is that I get a bit cuddly-wuddly about it and my preparations tend to be focused on Christmas, rather on the deeper meaning of Advent. I get totally obsessed by the Divonne nativity play, for example, and I get taken in by the constant bombardment of the ads and the shopping just like everyone else. I tend to conveniently forget about the challenges of this Advent season.

I forget about the challenge of the refiner's fire, I forget about straightening the paths, I forget about getting ready, on a deeper level, to welcome the greatest guest of all. On reflection, my preparations have all gone a bit wrong! And it's important to prepare right because faith is a serious business, a serious commitment, as well as a comfort and a nice warm feeling of being loved. So do join with me today as I try to get back on track with Advent!

The prophets had a thing or two to say about the serious side of faith. We remember them especially today with the focus of our Advent candles. And with our first reading we have heard from the prophet Malachi. Now he was writing after the Jews had been allowed to return from exile and rebuild the temple. It was a time of tremendous hope and promise for them and Malachi was keen to give that encouraging message.

But also the Jews had got pretty disheartened – they were a small nation, vulnerable, God had not yet come to their Temple to exalt his Kingdom as promised, the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah had not yet been realized. They were starting to lose hope about their identity, their future, and God's promises.

So Malachi wanted to encourage, to reassure, but he also wanted to warn and to challenge. He was saying, 'Yes, the Lord will come to the temple as promised, but it won't be as you had thought. There will be the burning through the refiner's fire, there will be cleansing and purifying with fullers' soap.'

Those were uncomfortable words to hear then and they are now too. It's not very nice to think that God might want **us** to pass through this refiner's fire and this purifying fuller's soap. I have a feeling that might not be very pleasant. My cuddly-wuddly feelings are dissipating fast!

And then we come to the rather discomfiting figure of John the Baptist. It is brilliant how Luke presents him – he firmly places him in a specific time and in a specific place. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea..." This is very factual – we are in an historical, geographical dimension.

Then we have a kind of transitional dimension, edging towards the context of faith "during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" ...

Then we move on to a different dimension altogether "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness". Here we slip into God's dimension, God's time, God's plan. We start to glimpse how the human and the divine will start weaving together for the birth of the Saviour. We slip into a deeper dimension altogether.

John the Baptist – another prophet in the line of the greats like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah. God is still speaking, still using strange and unusual characters to draw his people towards Him, still challenging with the strong language of deep preparation. "Prepare the way of the Lord."

There are some dramatic, seemingly impossible images here – ‘every valley shall be filled’ – imagine that happening.... ‘every mountain and hill shall be made low’ ...imagine La Dôle being made low... ‘the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth’ ...imagine the power needed to change the natural contours of the created world.

And all this preparation will culminate in the greatest promise ever made – “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

God’s dimension is beyond our imaginings you see. If we are to really understand something of it, if we are really to prepare for Christmas, for seeing in the new-born Jesus this salvation that is on offer, we need these weeks of Advent to get our heads round it. We need to do something other than shopping and planning parties and worrying about nativity plays!

With great intentions I bought this little book ‘Reflections for Advent’ knowing I probably wouldn’t read the page for every single day, and I don’t. But what I do read every day is the introduction about the season of Advent because it is quite amazing. It is written by Samuel Wells, who has written quite a few books now. He is vicar of St Martin in the Fields in London and also an acclaimed ethicist.

His piece about Advent is called ‘Never mind the width’, referring to old style tailors’ shops where you could get a lot of perhaps not very good quality material for your money if the spool had a hefty width. He uses that as a parable for our lives – never mind our deepest desires, never mind about our pain, our sadnesses and our struggles, let’s just turn our lives into one big distraction, one big session of ‘feeling the width’.

Wells suggests instead using Advent as a time to prepare deeply for Christmas, by facing up squarely to our deepest yearnings and our rawest needs – and that’s maybe what the refiner’s fire and the fuller’s soap is for us – and at the same time discovering a far-reaching hope. He writes “In Advent, God says to us, ‘Never mind the width. Your life isn’t about quantity of activity or length of days. Let go of the width. Feel the depth...and look into the deep heart of God.”

Wells encourages us to face up to our difficulties and sadnesses, to name our disappointments and dashed hopes and dreams.

To not be afraid to encounter our griefs, not to back away from the pain of them, not to fear being crushed by them.

Today we will have the opportunity to express this during our prayers with their focus on 'Blue Christmas', an idea which developed around the knowledge that Christmas for many of us is not only about joy and fun and unclouded happiness.

So courageously we will do this hard work of deep preparation with aching and groaning and yearning, but it is not the whole story because in doing so, we look into the heart of God.

Wells expresses it beautifully and powerfully..." Advent doesn't stop there...Advent also says, gently, cherishingly and tenderly, 'No. No, this isn't the way the story ends...No, this isn't God's last word on the matter. No, God hasn't finished with you. No, this groaning, this aching, this yearning won't be your eternal condition. God came in Christ to be with you, to groan with your groaning, to ache with your aching, to yearn with your yearning. God in Christ suffered on the cross to show you a yearning that is greater even than your yearning, a grieving that is greater even than your grieving, a longing that is greater even than your longing. A yearning and a longing for **you**.

"Christ rose from the dead to show you how the story ends, that all your pain and agony and tears will be taken up into glory, that all your sadness will be made beautiful and all your waiting rewarded. Christ ascended into heaven to show you that you'll spend eternity with God, that your hunger will be met in God's banquet, that everything you long for will be exceeded and overwhelmed in the glory of the presence of God, and that when you see the marks in Christ's hands and the Father's broken heart, you'll finally realise how achingly, convulsingly hungry God has always been for you."

So this Advent, never mind the shopping, because it doesn't matter if you haven't found the best gifts ever; never mind the planning of elaborate menus, because it doesn't matter if you've got home-made cranberry sauce or not; never mind worrying about nativity plays because they will be fantastic anyway...never mind the width. Feel the depth. Look into the heart of God and meet with his aching, yearning love for you. Amen.