

## **Sermon – Advent 2 (C) 2018**

Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3.1-6

*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'.*

It's starting to feel a bleak time of year, weather-wise. Blustery weather, and increasingly dark, miserable afternoons. Our garden's a mess, with the fallen leaves scattered all around and working their way into the lawn: I must get around to raking them up! My excuse was that although most of the leaves came down in the winds about a month ago, there was one apple tree that Joan planted which has been holding onto its leaves long after the rest: and yesterday afternoon there was just one, solitary leaf defying the season and holding on for all it's worth. But everywhere else the leaves on the ground are starting to rot, losing their lovely autumn colours.

And they provide us with a telling symbol for Advent. The leaves, once fresh and green but now golden brown, are actually dead, and they have been cast off to make way for the new growth. If we look closely, we can probably just make out the tiny undeveloped buds that will form growing points in the spring. Nature holds together the end and the beginning. The season of death, symbolised by the old leaves hanging on but finally dropping, needs to be replaced in a living tree by the life-bearing season of spring and new growth; and the promise of this new growth is already visible. That's a good illustration of Advent: the two themes sounding together – John the Baptist making way for the Christ (and that did mean death for John), and the Advent theme of joyful expectation.

In this season of the Church's year the readings and prayers challenge us to cast off all that is dry and dead in our lives as Christians, and to wait in simple trust, preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ at Christmas – the Christ who by his coming brings the promise of grace and renewal. And we share in the experience of those who – long before Jesus was born – yearned for his coming and prepared for it by their words and deeds, as did those great watchmen of the Lord, the Old Testament prophets. They march through the history of the Bible with their placards; each prophet's style is different and distinctive, but they all point to the same event.

The role of the prophet is not the role of a fortune teller – to think that prophets foretell what's going to happen in the future is to diminish the prophet and to miss the point. The role of the prophet is to speak out – to tell it like it is – to alert people to the mismatch between their lives and the will of God. This is often uncomfortable – but religion *is* uncomfortable, or true religion, anyway. A religion without demands is a religion that can never answer the deep yearning of the human heart. Religion is for life; our Christian religion is not a cushion: but a cross, that makes real demands on us. The land needs its autumn and its winter; our spiritual lives need their Advent and their Lent, if new life is to come.

The last in the line of the Old Testament prophets was of course John the Baptist. He stands between the two ages, embracing by his life and witness the end of the old order and the beginning of the new. Like the prophets who went before him, he points towards the saviour who is to come – but he's distinguished from the others: for them, the Day of the Lord was a distant prospect. But John the Baptist could point and say with confidence:

'The Kingdom of heaven has come near! The Kingdom is at hand!'

There's an old Persian proverb which says, 'A place where the sun always shines is a desert'. We might add to that from the experience of Christian faith, and say that a faith which only survives in the sunshine of certainty, never having to experience the darkness of doubt, is no true faith. A strong faith withstands doubt; but there's more to it than just that: the doubt makes the faith stronger, more real. The subsequent history of John the Baptist testifies to the truth of this – remember John had announced with burning conviction that the coming of the Christ was imminent, and he witnessed the beginning of Jesus's ministry. But later (and we'll be saying more about this next week) he was cut off from the sunshine, deep down in the darkness of Herod's prison, and there he was besieged by doubt. Had he been wrong about Jesus? Was this cousin of his really who he had thought? And so he had got his disciples to go and ask, 'Are you the One who is to come, or should we look for another?' – was Jesus really the expected Messiah? And they came back with the answer, not in the form of a searing and blinding revelation, but as a simple factual account of the healing work that signified the presence of a living Son of God. 'Go and tell John what you've seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them.'

Advent is for us a season of darkness, a season of cold, but this event that it leads to really does represent the salvation of the world. Advent shows us that God does come to answer our doubts and uncertainties. There are times when our lingering doubts cling on like dead

leaves, despite the unmistakable signs of growth that are clearly evident as we pause and look back on the distance we've travelled in our faith, as we look around us at the signs of God's love and faithfulness that have accompanied us at every stage.

At those times of darkness, which all Christians experience at some time or another we're sharing in the experience of faithful men and women in every age who – just like John the Baptist in the darkness of Herod's prison – have been troubled by doubts. And we can do the same, in each crisis of faith we meet, we can take a positive step as he did, and turn in the direction of Christ. If we do have doubts about our faith, perhaps we have loyal friends who can be for us – as John's friends were for him – messengers of hope, to assure us that the sunlight and warmth of God's love is indeed breaking into the world. Perhaps we can take our doubts seriously by offering them in prayer 'Lord, I believe – help thou my unbelief'.

The Kingdom which John the Baptist proclaimed with such vigour has indeed come; it is indeed upon us. That's an evergreen fact which we shall celebrate again this Christmas as we celebrate God-made-human. We can use the dark time of Advent to be open to the constant renewal God offers – shedding off the dead leaves of habit and certainty, and entering into the adventure which Advent represents – and finding that the new life (like the bud under the dead leaf) comes from within. Let us Christians glory in that constant renewal!

Amen.