

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 06 December 2015
A Sermon delivered by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman
at the Induction of Rev Ken Day to St Stephens Uniting Church
Advent 2C
Malachi 3: 1-4; Philippians 1: 3-11; Luke 3: 2-6

Advent is a beautiful time of year to begin a new ministry, for a congregation and for their minister. It is a time full of possibility and hope. There is a sense that this year, this season in ministry, we could indeed be who God has called us to be.

Meister Eckhart, the medieval Christian mystic proclaimed *"We are all called to be mothers of God, for God is always waiting to be born."*

On the second Sunday of Advent, we are called to prepare for this mystery, for God to be born in us again. The incarnation is finally not just about Jesus alone, but about us. How will we respond to the call to make the love of God real in the world?

As everyone goes a little crazy, as people stress themselves out at work and in their families, the church, at its best, provides a space for contemplation and for grace in Advent. For calm in the midst of the chaos. In the church we are reminded that preparing for the birth of Emmanuel, God with us, is in essence, about making space in our lives for Christ to be born.

We are preparing the way for the Christ Child to come into our homes and into our hearts. However, we are not worshipping an eternal baby. We are preparing for the coming of the adult Christ, bearing hope and good news, forgiveness and peace, not just for us but for everyone.

This afternoon, I want to reflect how the season of Advent enriches not only our personal spiritual journeys but our understanding of what it is to be the church in our time and place.

For this Sunday the compilers of the lectionary have included the rather obscure prophet Malachi, alongside John the Baptist.

Malachi and John remind us that the promise of Advent is not saccharine or easy. The word of the Lord came to Malachi as a word of promise. It's good news - but there is also a degree of uneasiness in the promise. There are some elements of the promise that we would love to have fulfilled, and other elements that we would just as soon leave aside.

This blend of joy and apprehension at the prospect of the promise fulfilled is most clearly reflected in verse 2: *"But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like Fullers' Soap."*

We might well respond to this promise by wondering exactly what is meant by the refining. What exactly in my life, what exactly in our church, is in need of refining? And how much will it hurt? What might we have to give up (or what might be taken from us) before we would be refined like gold and silver?

We want what Advent has to offer. We yearn to be the bearers of God in our world, and yet we are not always ready to face the pain that comes with new birth. If we go down this path, there will be new life, new love, and we will never be the same again.

Malachi's name means 'Messenger.' Like John the Baptist, he had a powerful critique of the status quo to share. A critique, and a call, about personal transformation and about the renewal of the political, religious and economic life of the community.

John the Baptist proclaims a message of repentance. He shares a vision of a righteousness fulfilled: crooked paths made straight and rough ways made smooth. His call is for change today, so that tomorrow the hope of justice may be fulfilled.

Malachi was a prophet from the post-exilic period of the second temple, in the first half of the fifth century BCE. He prophesied after the return of the Exiles to Judah. But now things weren't going so well. Enough time had gone by since the return, that it seems that the honeymoon of the restoration was over.

Congregations and ministers often have enormously high expectations of one another at the beginning of a new ministry, and through the highs and delights of those early weeks and months, skeptical clergy have been known to wonder when the honeymoon will be over. This doesn't mean that conflict is inevitable. It simply means that in time, we get real with one another and face the enormity of the task of being the people of God together.

It may seem a bit soon to bring up the subject of things getting more challenging after the initial joys, but here we have Malachi, definitely a post-honeymoon kind of prophet. And John the Baptist, calling us, in no uncertain terms, to Prepare. To prepare for a different way of being in the community of God's people, to prepare for change.

In Malachi's time, the people are grumbling about God and there is discontent.

But Malachi didn't suppress the difficult stuff. He enabled the people to face their questions, to live the questions, of faith.

In the two chapters that precede today's lectionary reading, it's all about questions. Honest questions, hard questions, and a commitment to working them through.

Malachi had some good questions for his day. *How has God loved us? Where is the God of justice? How shall we return to God?* Malachi poses twenty-two questions in just fifty-five verses.

Malachi is the go-between, articulating God's questions to the priests and the people and anticipating their responses. His prophetic style is interesting.

In addition to the typical prophetic pronouncements of "*Thus saith the Lord,*" he employs a deliberative question-and-answer method.

The prophet and the people are working it out together. The conversation is candid, confrontational and engaging. The prophet and the people are partners in critical reflection on the nature of God, and self-critical reflection on the conduct of God's people.

It's an interesting and provocative model for the relationship between minister and people, for surely that willingness to be self-critical of ourselves as the church is an essential aspect of what it takes for a ministry to thrive.

Malachi also has some good questions for our day. Malachi's questions, 500 years before the birth of Jesus, are Advent questions. Advent questions.

Advent questions our readiness and willingness for Christ's coming. Advent questions our openness to the transformation of the church, of the world, of our very selves. Advent questions if we are in fact willing to be God bearers.

Malachi calls the people of Israel from iniquity to a new "integrity and uprightness," and a renewed "reverence" for God's "covenant of life and well-being." (Mal. 2:5-6).

This text invites us to ask some good questions about what kind of church we want to be.

Malachi's prophecy invites us to think about our prayers. Are our prayers prophetic as well as personal? In our Advent prayers are we paying attention to injustice, corruption and violence, as well as to our own needs and anxieties about the season of Christmas?

When world leaders have gathered in Paris to discuss the ecological fate of the world and commit their nations to lower carbon emissions, what does repentance look like? In a context of global inequality in which those who are farthest from centers of power often suffer the most from climate change, what would justice look like now?

Last Sunday afternoon, forty-five thousand people walked past St Stephen's as the People's Climate March moved from the Domain to Circular Quay, in a living, moving, marching, singing, chanting, prayer for the well-being of the earth, and in solidarity with Pacific people's whose lands and livelihoods are threatened by climate change. Hundreds of those people were members of the Uniting Church.

During the last week, other Uniting Church people (and a Catholic priest and a Hillsong minister) were arrested at Malcolm Turnbull's electorate office to draw attention to the plight of asylum seeker children and their families who will continue to be held in dehumanizing, soul destroying concentration camps this Christmas.

Malachi and John the Baptist remind us that preparation for Advent involves examining the casual way we live our lives, so often ignoring God's promised judgment. We accept lies as truth. We accept the abuse and exploitation of our refugee neighbours. We participate in the abuse of the earth. We refuse God's justice and peace.

God has sent us messengers and prophets. In Advent, we are called again to prepare the way for the salvation of people and planet.

It is a demanding call. But, in responding to this call to be an Advent people, we are never left alone. In the promises of the prophets, in Malachi, in John the Baptist, God's promise of restoration and refining is sure. We will be re-formed in God's image.

No matter how good we feel about the promise of what lies before us, and no matter of how anxious we are about the change that awaits us, we are not alone. We live in a world that has been forever shaped by the Advent that became Incarnation. Emmanuel, God with us.

And you, community of St Stephen's Uniting Church, are not alone. You stand on this significant day in your common life, held together in, and by, the memory of Jesus. As St Paul, inspired by Christ, addressed the community of Philippi as beloved friends, may you also love one another, and love Ken, who you have called to minister with you, and among you.

And so I conclude with the words of Paul's prayer for the Philippians. *"And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best."*

This is a prayer. And this is also a promise.

Hear the good news, not just for them, long ago, but for us, and for the world God loves.

Good news, powerful enough to change our lives, and the world as well – our - world that God so loves.

Amen. So may it be.