

Malachi 3:1-4

Psalm 67

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-9

The Refiner's fire...

John the Baptist never appears on Christmas cards, and yet he and his preaching normally figure on two of the four Sundays of Advent. There is a certain amount of ambiguity to this season. At one level our imagination begins to anticipate the warm and friendly narrative of the nativity. We long for the homeliness of that story and the gentle grace of God of which it speaks. But at another level Advent is a little Lent in which we are counselled towards some acts of austerity. We also encounter themes of judgement, not least through the figure of John, whose preaching reflects Isaiah's call for the highways of the world to be levelled and straightened for the coming of the Lord. Malachi says the messenger who prepares the way will be like a strong, scouring soap. The sort used in preparing skins for tanning. He will be like a refiner's fire, and he will purify the people. Who can ignore the sense of judgement, and even threat, in these images? As we listened to the readings we might have found ourselves asking: "will we feel better for having come to church today?" As Victoria burns, do we need to hear of a refiner's fire that will purify the people of God? And there is a lot of refining and sifting out to do at another level. The Cole Enquiry has handed down its findings and there is more purifying to go on. The US Congress has received a damning report on the conflagration that is the war in Iraq. In church today, how are we to hear and respond to the proclamation of another kind of deep sifting of human purposes?

Malachi was especially hard on the Levites, the priests. They were inattentive in ritual matters, slack over divorce, and sceptical in matters of faith. At the same time the hearts of the people yearned for God. They delighted in the covenant. They hoped for God's appearance in the Temple. Malachi warns that the Lord **will** come, but this may not be a warm fuzzy event. Instead it may be an occasion on which people have difficulty in standing upright, for they may not be ready to face the difference between themselves and the one who comes.

What was unclear in Malachi was whether the messenger who would prepare the way would be an earthly or heavenly being. Was it the prophet himself, or was Elijah to return? The Church links Malachi's words with John. He is the messenger who straightens the way for the coming of God. The Elder who reads the Gospel on this day in Year C deserves our sympathy because of all the names and places it contains. But by this means Luke is saying the Word of the Lord was not something so heavenly and sacred it made no real contact with life as we know it. Luke's Gospel is that the Word came to the people in the normal political and religious context of their time. And it came to John, not in the splendour of the Temple or the Palaces of the day. But in the out of the way places - the wilderness, which for Israel was anything but a wasteland. From the desert the Prophets come. The Wilderness was the place of suffering and miracle, of grumbling and divine revelation, of struggle for freedom and the birth of

new hope. Long before, when the people's Wilderness journey was over, they crossed the Jordan River into new life. Now, John called them to enter into the Jordan again. Not as an initiation into a new community, as Baptism is for today, but as a sign of their admission that the highways of the world needed straightening, and they were ready to face up to the urgency of the times. Accepting John's Baptism meant being ready to face God.

John the Messenger starkly seeks a radical, even terrible, newness in his audience. There seems to be some form of threat in his preaching. We read on to next week's verses, just to capture the sense of how little people could rely on heritage [Abraham as our father], or what they had, to see them through. "The axe is laid to the root of the trees." John's day was a time of determination. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance" he said. Faith is meant to generate faithful efforts and what is not fruitful will not last. Let your lives reveal you have returned to the source. It hard to imagine a Christmas card on this theme! Yet the purpose of John's work is not punishment or destruction. It is for turning around and going in a different direction. The Messenger comes because God seeks to prepare the whole world for the coming of divine forgiveness. If there is any lingering doubt about this, consider the Psalm for today, which is Zechariah's response at being told the news that he and Elizabeth were to have a son. The Benedictus is a hymn of blessing to God, whose saving story did not begin with John and Jesus, but with Abraham. And it stretched out to encompass David and the Prophets. If we are in any doubt about the divine vision for the world, reflect on these words. There we find the forgiveness that is reconciliation; the light that illumines the darkness, and the call to walk the way of peace.

John's preaching prepared the way for the coming of Salvation. Now this is a big word. It means deliverance, preservation, to keep alive, to preserve from death, to offer a way of safety. Imagine how many people, not far from us today, would pray for some or all of these things. But Luke does not concentrate on what the people want. His emphasis is on what God desires to give, not only to the historic people, but to "all flesh". God wants to rejoin what has become separated, God wants to speak and touch us into life, that all may live in the peace that was the original vision for creation. And we know that God gave what God seeks for us. It has been gifted to us in a babe who was born in a manger, to be worshipped by dirty, outcast shepherds and resplendent foreign kings. It was fully embodied in a bold ministry of inclusive compassion and justice. It reached its zenith in a death, which proclaimed the ultimate depth to which love can go.

If we still have trouble with John's preaching and the concept of Judgement, consider this. When we are confronted by a superlative act of compassion, it is commonly the case that we feel guilty at our own lack of generosity and care. That is what it means to be judged by love. That is what it means to feel the heat of the refiner's fire. And the point is, the end of this story is so rich and gracious, when you look at it, the call to new life is hardly a price too high to pay.

John's preaching may seem harsh, but his ferocity is because we are rather too attached to our preferred way of doing things. And it is obvious to us that at all levels of society there is still a huge difference between what God wants for us, and where we are still found to be. There is still a need for straightening out. The good news is there is time to turn, to change and make amendment of life. And to be ready again, in the deepest sense, to receive the gift that is on offer, this Christmas.