



Call to Worship

The glory of the Lord shall be revealed
and all people shall see it.

Hymn O come, O come Immanuel (StF 180, H&P 85)

Prayers

Let us pray:

God our Father,
creator of all that is seen and unseen,
who throughout human history
inspired witnesses to tell
of your greatness and love,
we bring to you
our praise and adoration.
Inspire us too by your Holy Spirit
so that we may gladly worship you
and faithfully serve you,
and sing praises to you every moment;
through Christ our Lord. Amen

Old Testament Reading - Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 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; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.(NRSV)

Gospel - Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the

wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" (NRSV)

Hymn On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry (Stf 182, H&P 84)

Sermon

What a way to open a chapter! These are the days of powerful men: Emperor Tiberias, Pontius Pilate, Herod, his brother Philip, Lysanias, and Annas and Caiaphas, the High priests. But something more powerful is afoot. God is at work. Into this world of the politics of power comes the power of the word of God. And how ironical that in spite of the fact that seven powerful men thought they were in charge of things, God chose to speak to a nobody named John living in the desert. God puts the powerful in their place and lifts up the lowly. The word of God came outside the circles of power into the wilderness. Heralding something new. And yet there is nothing new under the sun: Ask the prophets! says Luke. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' Perhaps Luke believed those seven powerful men were the crooked that need straightening, the rough that need smoothing, the flesh that was preventing others seeing the salvation of God.

Now is the time of God's decisive action. John the Baptist, prophet-like, heralds its coming. The kingdom of God's power in the person of Jesus is at hand. Luke quotes Isaiah's vision of the coming salvation of God which describes the earthworks needed to build a road across a wilderness. Think of cutting through hills for a motorway or railway: I remember living in Rastrick when the M62 was being built - digging and shifting tons of rubble and in the days of the prophet it was done by hand shovelful by shovelful. God's coming disrupts the way things have always been, the way the landscape lies.

The Prophet Malachi whose name simply means 'messenger' offers a strong challenge to the powerful, to the corrupt religious leaders of his own day, "suddenly God will come to his temple and you won't be able to bear it - the day of the Lord is a time of refining and purifying, of judgement." "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?" This is a message of some urgency - are you fit to receive the returning Lord?

For Malachi it is like God is working with precious metals, refining and purifying gold and silver by putting through the fire to remove the muck and revealing the purity of the metals. God is a consuming fire burning away impurity. Then Malachi has another vivid image for God: God is like a washerwoman armed with fuller's soap. This is laundry soap, the hard stuff that scrubs and scours clean; God is a laundry woman purifying people from the accumulated dirt of evil ways.

God, who loves us more deeply than we can ever truly understand, holds us to the best, challenges us to be what we were created to be: people made in the image of our holy God who embody that holiness in our lives: that is essentially Malachi's message to us. And Luke believes that John proclaims the same message.

Advent is the time when we prepare ourselves for God's coming among us. And Malachi insists that the way we live now, individually and as church and nation, will come under God's righteous judgement when he holds us to his gold standard or contrasts us with the pure holiness of Jesus.

So, in Advent we have vivid images of fire, scrubbing and highway engineering to describe what it is like to prepare to experience the salvation of God. Advent isn't simply a cosy time of chocolate-filled calendars, present buying, and all the other preparations for Christmas that all too easily get in the way. We have a family story from when my niece was little – shopping with her Mum in a garden centre, among the Christmas decorations, she was fussing over a nativity scene filled with moss – when her exasperated mother asked her what on earth she was doing – she turned and told her mum – 'I can't see Jesus for all this stuff!'

Advent tells us we have to clear through the stuff to let the light of Christ reach us in all aspects of our lives and, if we do, Malachi warns us that we can expect God to probe and clean us up. Malachi condemned the failure and corruption of the leaders of his day. If Malachi was in this pulpit today there might be several things in the news which would be named for uncompromising judgement. I'm pretty sure you can think of examples – lies, dishonesty, corruption, greed, lack of compassion

In Advent, we are preparing to meet a King who comes in a way the world does not expect. In Jesus Christ, God has shared our human nature and comes to us in the company of the poor and outcast. That is where we will find him. On dinghies crossing the Channel maybe, with refugees fleeing their war-torn homelands and risking everything in hope of a place of safety for themselves and their families.

We are created in the image of a holy God whose concern is for all humanity – without exception. And as God's people, we are made for a holiness that reflects that same concern. Advent is a call to wake up and make straight in the desert the way of the Lord. Not to let the stuff obscure our vision of the kingdom he calls us to share.

As we all live our busy lives, do our jobs, raise our children, look after the grandchildren, count our aches and pains, finish our shopping and cross things off our lists, are we really preparing the way for God to move among us? Of course, there is joy and hope and love in Advent but let us not miss the challenge. When Advent comes, am I so busy preparing for Christmas that I am unprepared for the voice of God, crying out in the wilderness, unprepared to see behind all

the stuff the God at work transforming the world, unprepared to join God in the task? Amen

Prayers of Thanksgiving

As streets fill with shoppers,
Bright lights and tempting offers,
Christmas songs and children's laughter,
You lead us along a different path
To a desert river and a Prophetic voice,
A call to repentance,
A call to service,
A call to immerse ourselves
In living water that will never run dry,
A call to prepare a way in our own lives
For the Saviour of the world to enter in,
To know the touch of tender mercy
And rest in your forgiving love:
For your faithful prophets
And your Living Word
We give you thanks. Amen

written by John Birch

Intercession

I invite you to take up a newspaper, or come to these prayers after a news bulletin on TV or the radio.

Then holding all the news in your hearts and minds take up the prayer of Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
yours are the only hands with which he can do his work,
yours are the only feet with which he can go about the world,
yours are the only eyes through which his compassion can shine
forth upon a troubled world.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours. Amen

The Lord's prayer: Our Father...

Hymn God has spoken by his prophets (StF 157, H&P 64)

Blessing

Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine on us
and scatter the darkness from before us;
and the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be ours, now and always. Amen