

SERMON – 5 DECEMBER 2021 – MALACHI 3.1-4, LUKE 3.1-6



“Look I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me” says God, through the prophet Malachi, and immediately my mind goes off on a tangent. I think of Henry, an old man I used to take communion to in Bury St Edmunds, and he’d talk of the past – how he started his working career at the age of 14 as a messenger boy for a jewellers in the City of London. We used to talk about buses and trams, and the places he went, the tasks he carried out. Then my mind jumped to some of my old GPO films, films shot by the General Post Office film unit just after the War – and there’s one of those following the story of a youngster joining the Post Office straight from school at 14, and graduating up through the ranks to become a fully-fledged postman. There’s a Lord Peter Wimsey story where the messenger boys are integral to the murder, Ginger’s catapult taken while the boys are doing their morning Physical Exercises. Perhaps the most poignant story was the lady who was Post-mistress on Fair Isle, up in the Far North, between Orkney and Shetland, during the First World War. Part of her job was to deliver the telegrams – so if you saw her coming across the island towards your croft, your heart would sink. What was the message? What did the telegram say? She took to wearing a different colour scarf – so if you saw her coming with a red scarf, you knew the telegram was OK, even good news – son on leave, on the way home. If she was wearing a black scarf, you had time to prepare for the worst – that was the message you did not want the messenger to deliver.



These days some of us have hundreds, thousands, of messages a day. The number of phone calls and letters I get has vastly decreased in the last few years, but the emails and the facebook message and the tweets and whatsapp and messenger – so many messages. Often overwhelming, often trivial, often a huge waste of time and effort – but also fun and amusing, provocative and awful, linking, comfortable. I moan about modern communication – but if my kids were away from home, I can keep in contact. I’m not like the crofter on

Fair Isle waiting months for a letter or a telegram, my kids can (and do) message me several times a day. Not like the once a week phone call I gave my parents when I was their age.

It then struck me that the messenger and the message are not separate – our Fair Isle post lady might just be the messenger, but she knew the families, she shared their pain. The herald in a Shakespeare play – thinking of the one in Henry V – is invested with his message, part of the action.



Malachi may be the messenger of God, but was he invested in that message. His very name, “Malachi” means “messenger”, and he was a prophet speaking to the Jewish people when they were in exile. Jerusalem is abandoned, the temple is unused, God seems to have abandoned His people. And yet, “the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight”, he is coming. God is going to renew his covenant, his promise. The rainbow of the covenant with Noah, the covenant with Abram, your descendants will be as numerous as the stars or the grains of the sand, the covenant with David – the whole idea of a relationship between God and His people.



He is coming, God is with you. But – that has serious meaning. God is not just your chummy friend in the sky, God is a God of truth and justice and righteousness. He is like a refiner’s fire, like fuller’s soap. Go to a living museum like the one at Ironbridge, and watch the metalworker, his forge, his hammer and tongs. I don’t pretend to understand the chemical reactions that take place at high temperatures, as molten metal changes its form, its fabric – but I

watch, amazed, and a little frightened. I have film of the LMS in Derby, the railway workshops in this town, where they forged the metal for the locomotives – it seems such a long way from what happens on Pride Park today. “Fuller’s soap” – some of us are old enough to remember our mothers’ washing by hand. Scrubbing the collars to get them clean – again, you can only understand this passage if you think back. Nowadays we just stick it in the machine and press “start”, then there was a real cleansing action, and it took hard work and effort. Again I’ve got film of the LMS hotel service, and the laundries here in Derby which washed all the sheets, the bedding, the table clothes of all the railway hotels across the system. Cleansing was hard physical work. There is a cost to it.

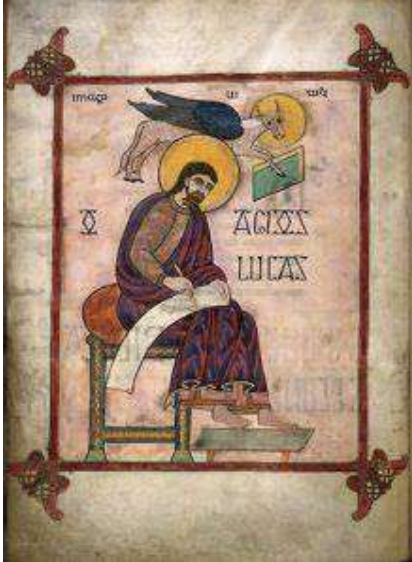
But the cost is worth it. Repent, be refined, be cleansed – and when you present offerings to the Lord in righteousness, he will be pleased. “Then the offerings of Jerusalem and Judah will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.”



Most of us are happy at going back to “days of old” and “former years” – I’ve done quite a lot of that in this sermon! It was lovely this last week when I emailed the families who were part of the regular life of our churches before Covid, who have been here for baptisms and celebrations in the last two years – I emailed them to give them the Christmas service details and especially to flag up that we’d like to do something with them all a fortnight today – some sort of Nativity in the 10 am service. And within a few minutes some of the families had replied – yes, they’d love to come, they’ll get the kids to dress up, they’re looking forward to it. And that was so encouraging - now how many will come in a fortnight with the busy lives they lead, I dunno – but I hope we’ll have some, and we’ll be able to do some sort of celebrations. In our heart of hearts we know we can’t turn our world, our church, back to exactly where we were a few years ago – the world has moved on, and we must too.



It's not all bad – lovely last week to watch Clive, who we all know is skilled and dynamic where it comes to all things modern and technological, watching him Zoom like a pro, while Sophie, one of our St Edmund's congregation in her 20s, controls the service from her university digs in Leeds. That wouldn't have happened two years ago! We have certainly taken "church" outside the building.



Then we move into the Gospel, and Luke, historian that he is, plants his story very firmly in history. "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."

This is not God working vaguely, this is God at work in a time and a place – no invisible, distant God, but a God who is with his people. He sent John the Baptist – his prophet, another Malachi, another messenger – to tell people that God is at work, that they must repent.

This is the message, evil needs to be repented. It matters, you cannot just shrug your shoulders and ignore what is wrong, evil needs to be repented. You need to turn away from what is wrong, turn your back on evil, make a conscious decision to accept what is wrong, ask forgiveness, and start afresh.



As a Society that should speak to us in the 21st century. A crowd of people tried to stop the Hastings lifeboat being launched this week – they don't want more migrants in this country, let them drown in the Channel. They need to repent, and our politicians, our newspapers, need to repent as well. Those of us who use the word "migrant" rather than the word "human" need to do some repenting as well. All of us, and I include myself, who judge people by the colour of their skin, need to repent.

Is it enough to put some food in the shed on the first Sunday of the month? We are very grateful that you do. But is it enough? The political will to provide accommodation, to help people into it, to get people off the streets – that's expensive, and who's paying?



Derby City Mission emailed last week asking if we could publicise their fund-raising campaign to pay for an additional Debt and Benefits Adviser. A skilled job, and through their work, I quote, "many people have been released for the prison of debt, been saved from eviction, are given the skills to be able to get back in control of their finances and, with the support of our foodbank, feed their families. This year we have been able to write off £1 million of debt." I made a donation, while wanting to repent, to ask God's forgiveness, that Society has encouraged so many people to get into the position where they need it – and knowing that, if my job wasn't so secure, and my stipend guaranteed, there, but for the grace of God, go I.



"Prepare the way of the Lord" – and that's what we do. We try and stand up for what is right, we try and listen to people, we try to understand their fears, we try to keep a sense of perspective, and a sense of humour, and we believe that – even in the mess that is the end of 2021 – God is with us, and he always will be.

"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." Amen.