

Finding Peace at Christmas

Mirrors! Some mirrors seem to do us more justice than others? Have you been to a hall of mirrors where they distort your shape – make you look taller, fatter or smaller? Mirrors can flatter but more often than not, they can challenge us.

God's word is described as like a mirror. The brother of Jesus, James, once wrote ,James 1:23-25. “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.”

The Bible, God's Word is like a spiritual mirror, which we would do well to look at often.

When we do, more often than not, it gives us a clear picture of who we are in the sight of God.

That was the task of the prophets, they spoke God's word, as they held it up as a mirror to the people of their generation, and they were not well received because people often didn't like what they saw.

As we approach Christmas, this season of Advent, it is one of preparation, preparing our hearts for Christmas, for the coming of Christ, and we do that through using God's word as a mirror, taking time to look deep into our lives and to honestly assess where we stand before God.

It takes courage to do this but as a spiritual practice, it's well worth the effort.

Today's reading from the book of Malachi, is all about God holding up a mirror to his generation and what we see in this mirror is not good news.

They are far from the way that God wants them to be. He begins with revealing what the religious leaders were doing, they were selling God short, sacrifices were dishonouring to God, and they were commending people who were doing evil and telling them that they were doing good in the eyes of the Lord, and that the Lord was pleased with them.

So, Malachi holds up a mirror and gets them to see that what they were doing was not God's will.

He was like a boot camp instructor. He took them into the woods and exposed to them how unfit they had become. He was revealing to them how far from God they had wandered.

But his real challenge to them was how they treated other people - especially the weak and the poor.

Malachi 3:5, "So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.

He saw injustice rampant in his nation. He saw cheating and fraud. He saw inequality and oppression for widows and orphans. He saw no justice for the foreigners and he holds this like a mirror to his generation.

I wonder how Malachi would address our world today? Our nation, our city, our town, our churches, our homes, our hearts?

Would his message be any different? Would his words still challenge?

Malachi, whose name means Messenger/Angel announces that a messenger is coming to prepare the way for God to enter his world. God is coming and he is going to put his people on trial.

So, he calls them to change their ways before he comes.

The messenger will make straight paths for God and prepare the hearts of mankind for God.

Unexpectedly this messenger will return to His Temple and He was coming to make reforms.

Malachi asks the rhetorical question, who will endure the day of his coming – who will be able to stand when he appears? Who is able? No one of

course! For we all fall short of God's standards. No one is perfect and we are all guilty.

Malachi tells us that he is coming to purify his people.

The verb here is the same one that was used for the metallurgical task of smelting and refining, where the metal is heated to melting point so the impurities within it separate and can be removed, leaving a purer metal. It is a vivid description of cleansing our hearts from sin.

The second metaphor derives from the realm of cloth manufacturing. The fuller, the one who cleans and thickens the cloth by bathing it and working it uses a special soap to clean it. So we get that image of cleansing our souls from impurities.

The coming messenger is not eagerly anticipated by the people, however his coming is not for the purpose of destruction but for restoration.

And that is good news.

But who is he going to refine?

Firstly, he is going to purify the Levites. Why the Levites? Because the Levites are the priests and the those who oversee the Temple, so purification begins within God's house, with God's servants.

If I take this and apply it to our generation, it starts in God's house, with God's ministers. It begins here and Malachi knows if the House of God is not right, then the whole house is contaminated.

The Levites have polluted the ritual practice of the Temple with their practices, offering inferior sacrifices to God, they need to be purified before they can offer sacrifices on behalf of others. But more than that, they have neglected their care for the poor and needy, the least and the marginalised and God is holding them to account.

So that is the scene that Malachi paints and it's a challenging theme for us on this second Sunday of Advent that God's messenger is coming to purify us from sin.

So, over the next few weeks, we may want to look closer at God's word, to hold it up as a mirror, to use it to speak into our lives and to let it challenge us. It can refine and purify, if we allow it.

What should we read?

The Gospels would be a good place to go to.

Simply make time each day to read a passage, to reflect on it, to hold it up as a mirror and to ask God, *what does this say to me*, and *what do I need to do*, so that I will not be like that man in the letter of James who saw himself and forgot what he looked like.

Let us sing together the beautiful hymn 189 "*Be still for the presence of the Lord*"

Luke 3:1-6

400 years of silence. It's a long time in the life of a nation – from the Old Testament to the New that's the time gap.

What was happening in the world at that time? Alexander the Great was conquering the world and the Greek Hellenistic spirit was taking root throughout the known world.

Silence came from Jerusalem.

The Roman Empire came into being 31 BC when Augustus Caesar proclaimed himself Emperor of Rome. The Romans had already taken power in Jerusalem in 63 BC and suddenly in the midst of the Roman Empire came a voice, a voice in the wilderness, and that describes where the people of Israel were at the time, in the wilderness, as far as their relationship with God was concerned.

But now God is speaking to the nation again. It begins in the wilderness, in the quiet places. That's where God begins.

We are told that a man proclaims, *"The time has come to prepare the way for the Lord, to make straight paths for him."* This is the prophecy of Malachi now taking shape. The Lord was about to appear. The voice of God through his people had been silenced, now he was about to speak again, and Luke tells exactly when it happens. In the reign of Tiberius Caesar and Herod was the governor, and when Annas and Caiaphas were the High Priests, the Word of God came to John in the desert. The time was right..

It was a voice of anticipation...Something exciting was about to happen.

God was going to intervene, all those years of waiting and now the Kingdom was to begin and the Messiah was coming!

Advent must be about anticipation, waiting for something exciting to happen, waiting for God to Come. And he does come, into our hearts and minds, if we let him, and so advent is a time of engagement and meeting with God afresh, even in the desert times of life, as we listen to the voice of the Baptist, prepare the way.

That's what Malachi and John the Baptist were all about, they were people who urgently called others to get ready, to put aside everything that was blocking their route to God, and to make straight paths for the King to come.

What things in our lives need to be laid to one side at this time?

Maybe there are other things that block the Lord from coming into our lives. Well, now's the time to lay them aside.

When a special visitor comes to your house, you might spend time preparing for this visit.

I remember every New Year when I was a boy, come Hogmanay, all the time in the evening, or so it seemed to me, was like spring cleaning, not that our house needed it, but it was about getting ready for a new year to arrive – a sense of something wonderful about to happen, out with the old dust as we waited expectantly for that tall dark stranger carrying a lump of coal to come to the door at midnight.

It certainly heightened the occasion, a new year, an advent of good things.

As we prepare for Christmas, may we lay aside all that blocks the way for God to enter our lives, and may we make room for Him first and foremost.

John's task was to make a people prepared for the Lord. To prepare the way of Christ, not as some sort of warm-up act. But rather as one who would get people to welcome Jesus. For him it was all about pointing a way from himself and pointing to Christ, *I must decrease so that he will increase*. That is our task also at Advent, to point away from ourselves towards Christ, so that others will meet with Jesus.

Reflection

There is a silence in waiting:

stillness,

cleansing,

renewal.

It centres the soul to the beginning.

There is an anticipation in waiting:

suspenseful;

beguiling;

profound.

It centres the soul to be ready.

There is a redemption in waiting:

joyful;

praising;

favourable.

It centres the soul to God.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit