

God's work is not finished.

Malachi 3:1-14, Song of Zechariah, Phil 1: 1-11, Luke 3: 1-6

Advent, like Lent, is a penitential season – a time of reflection, self-examination, prayer, repentance and renewal in our life of faith. These penitential seasons are a great gift of the tradition of the Church and our common life together and so we must make the most of these gifts of grace and use these times well. It is perhaps easier to enter an attitude of reflection and penitence through Lent than it is through Advent. Advent seems to get swallowed up by the madness we have created around Christmas – prayer gives way to shopping, reflection is pushed aside by busyness, and often the closest we get to repentance is vowing that we won't do all this again next year, but of course, we do!

As God's people though, as the Body of Christ in the world, we are called first and foremost to obedience, faith and holiness of life. When we fail to honour our vocation, we rob ourselves of real life, the angels weep, and the whole earth suffers.

Our reading from Malachi addresses the failure of God's people to honour their calling. The Levites, the priestly cast of Israel, have failed to live their calling as spiritual leaders, and the people also have been with-holding things from God.

Their offerings have not been pure, complete or acceptable to God. The text indicates that it is not so much physical things or objects that have been with-held from God, but righteousness – right and just acts and relationships amongst the people of God. The offences that the Lord will judge are listed as sorcery, adultery, unjust and oppressive treatment of employees, the neglect of the poor and helpless, inhospitable behaviour towards the stranger. What concerns God is not, what percentage of our wealth we give as an offering to him, but the way in which we love and live with our neighbours. As the people of God are called to repent of distorted and abusive relationships, of the inequality and injustice that permeates our social interactions, the way we dishonour God, ourselves and each other.

Malachi speaks of a messenger being sent to herald the coming of the Lord and in Luke today we read of the calling of John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus.

John's appearance and witness marks the end of the old age of Law and promise and the birth of the new age of fulfilment. Luke tells us that John comes in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah: *The voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight....all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

John comes proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, a call to turn back to God to be healed, renewed, washed clean, made whole. John of course, is not declaring his own power to do this, but pointing to the One who would come after him, the Messiah, Jesus, who would make all of this possible. John's calling and witness to Christ is also told of in the Song of John's father, Zechariah:

And you child shall be called the prophet of the Most High: for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.

Salvation is at hand, repent, turn back to God and be forgiven and healed. This is John's message and he proclaimed it in every aspect of his life.

This calling comes to John when he is in the wilderness, and I wonder whether perhaps we can understand this as a metaphor for our own lives when we feel far away from God. John's wilderness was obviously a physical place in which he lived and prayed, but as the wilderness or desert is such a strong motif through the biblical narrative, in both the Old and New Testaments, it is a landscape that has become part of the bedrock of our spiritual consciousness.

Perhaps John shouting in the wilderness is a symbol of the wilderness of all hearts yearning for God. I suspect there are many such hearts in our own local area, hearts crying out for healing, hope and life in the midst of hardship, pain and superficiality.

However, John shouting in the wilderness is also a sign of great hope and grace. God does not say to us: "Find your own way out of the wilderness and then I'll draw near". Rather, God comes into the heart of the wilderness to meet us. The life-giving Spirit of God enters into the wilderness to find, call and equip John to witness to the healing mercy of God, and this gives us a glimpse of what Jesus does in the Incarnation. The Word becomes flesh, and in Jesus, enters into

what it means to be fully human, to dwell with us wherever we are, and lead us to life and wholeness.

This is what John bears witness to with his life, it is what we truly celebrate at Christmas, and it is what we too are called to bear witness to with our lives.

In his letter to the Philippian church Paul enters into this great theme of the incarnation – God entering our lives and our nature in a profoundly intimate way, and redeeming us through his mercy and love. Paul encourages the Philippians to live in a way that honours this life-giving gift of grace and love.

He speaks with joy and gratitude for the great treasure we share because of what Jesus has done for us and he speaks to the Philippian Christians with deep compassion and encouragement for them in their life of faith. Paul describes this Christian community as partners with him in sharing and spreading the gospel. This is such a powerful and life-giving image for them, and for us, in our life together as a community of Christ. Just as the Philippians are partners with Paul, so too are they partners with all who have gone before them and have come after them. Together with Paul, the Philippian Christians are also partners with John the Baptist as they continue his work of proclaiming the salvation of all people through the grace of God.

Together with Paul, the Philippian church and John, *we* are partners in sharing the gospel of life, just as we are partners with Sihati and her church in Indonesia, Karen Darda, our link missionary in Japan, and our brothers and sisters in Christ in our partner parish of Murrumburrah Harden.

This is such an encouragement, particularly for small communities of faith, or those who are struggling with all sorts of hardships and challenges. We are not on our own, we share this vocation with many, many others, across time, space and culture, and we can rejoice that between us the gospel is shared in many different and wonderful ways.

Paul says: *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you, will bring it to completion by the day of Christ.*

This is such a hope-filled affirmation isn't it? God is constantly, faithfully, and lovingly working towards bringing to fulfilment our redemption and our vocation as witnesses to his light and life in the world. We may not see much happening at times, we may not be able to imagine the future, especially when

things seem so challenging, but God is at work among us, calling us to repentance, to prayer, to holy living, to transformation and new beginnings.

In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

The Lord be with you.