

REPENTANCE:

[ADVENT 2 – MALACHI 3:1-4; PSALM 126; PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11;
LUKE 3:1-6]

“Jesus will come again in glory, to judge the living and the dead... We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen”

During this season of advent we not only remember that God in Christ came to our earth as a helpless babe, but we also look to Christ’s coming again! Indeed Paul exhorts the Philippians to “love more and more so that they may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ”.

It is quite remarkable that we face the thought of God coming, so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of the Lord. Malachi says it well; “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said: “we have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us.” We have become indifferent to the message that we have heard over and over again. Like at a buffet we take only the pleasant and agreeable, we forget that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for every one who has a conscience.

For who of us are without sin, without a darker side to our humanity? I have recently reread a book called the ‘Wizard of Earthsea’. It is a fantasy story about a wizard by the name of Ged. In his arrogance, Ged invokes an evil shadow. Initially Ged tries to flee the terrifying shadow, but eventually he forces himself to confront it. The shadow seems to be all together too powerful for him until he names it... he calls it by his own name, he calls it Ged. “In naming the shadow with his own name, he makes himself whole: a person: who, knowing his whole true self, cannot be used or possessed by any power other than himself, and whose life therefore is lived for life’s sake and never in the service of ruin, or pain, or hatred.” In other words Ged was able to name his own sin. He had the courage to admit his darker side. Those of us who are familiar with the ten step program used by alcoholics anonymous will know that this is the first step of that program.

The ability to recognize and name our sinfulness certainly carries with it a creative power in overcoming our darker sides. But what is sin? What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear that word? We would probably all have different answers for that question. I wouldn't be surprised if we have different answers at different stages of our lives. I certainly would have answered this question vastly differently several years ago. I would probably have understood sin in terms of actions I have performed to disappoint God. My understandings have developed and, I hope, will continue to develop. The liturgy has had no small part to play in my own growth. I have learned much from the richness of the prayer for penitence: "we have sinned against you, through our own fault, in thought, word, and deed, and in what we have left undone." That last line invokes what have often been called the sins of omission, that which we ought to do, these are often far more serious than the 'bad' things we do.

It is far easier to focus on isolated sins performed by individuals: lying, promiscuity, indulging in pornography, speaking unkind words, substance abuse etc. However, it is the sins of omission, that which we fail to do, these are what allow evil structures and systems to be perpetuated! Think of a common South African experience... a wealthy white person has something stolen by a black street kid, so the street kid can feed his glue addiction. The street kid is guilty of a sin: stealing! The wealthy white person is the victim... what have they ever done to the street kid? Well that's exactly the point: nothing! To use the words of Jesus, the street kid was neighbour to the wealthy white person. Many of us are quite content to 'walk by on the other side of the road', we choose not to see the needs of others, let alone put ourselves out for the needs of others. Jesus in his parable of the Good Samaritan criticizes not only those who rob the traveler, but also those who walk past on the other side. Indeed, Jesus told the parable for those who wished to walk past on the other side.

Enter John the Baptist who, like the prophets before him, understood the issue of sin all too well! I'm sure we're aware of a common misperception about prophets predicting the future. Albert Nolan writes that, "A prophecy is not a prediction, it is a warning or a promise, the prophet warns Israel about God's judgment and promises God's salvation. Both the warning and the promise are conditional. They depend upon the free response of the people of Israel. What was the meaning of John's message? John's message of both warning and promise is meant to persuade the people to change or repent. Warning, of course, strikes fear even in our hearts two thousand years later, especially when it concerns things like the judgment of God and the catastrophe that both John and Jesus saw coming. Promise, on the other hand, sounds much better to our ears and hearts, especially as Christmas approaches, but our hearing of the gospel is only partial if we neglect one and focus only on the other.

John called the people of his day to repentance. Literally this means “to change one’s mind”. In the context of John’s ministry, this repentance involves the turning of the whole person in spirit, mind and will back to God. I mentioned earlier that my understanding of sin has developed significantly over the years. I believe that this development is part of the repentance process or part of a series of conversions. I am sure that more conversion and repentance lies ahead, a thought that is both exhilarating and frightening. It is far more comfortable to think of faith and conversion as a once off choice or experience that, once made, requires no more thought or action. Our relationship with God is an ongoing process. To name the sin in one’s self and the world is a painful process but hugely necessary if we are serious about being Christ followers. Malachi compares this process a refiners fire and fullers soap. Both of these images produce wonderful results: pure silver and clean cloth. However the refining requires huge heat and the fuller scrubs and beats the cloth. Change, though painful and difficult, is essential! Let us not forget the encouraging words of Paul to the Philippians: “the good work begun in *you* will be brought to completion.”

We are a people straddled between the incarnation of Christ and his coming again. Like the Psalmist we can look back and rejoice in the restoring work that God has already done. Yet we too experience tears and weeping, we long for a fuller restoration. What are we to do? We could look more critically at ourselves, we could be personally better prepared for the coming of Christ. But what hope do we have of changing our world? What can we do against oppressive systems, evil structures and the plague of apathy? Did you notice the impressive historical name dropping that Luke indulges in, at the beginning of today’s Gospel Passage: “Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Annas and Caiaphas. Amongst these we have an Emperor, a Governor, two Princes and the two most powerful Jewish religious leaders of the time. Yet in the midst of all these ‘important’ people, the word of God came to a nothing son of a nobody in a godforsaken place. If God can use John... the nobody, then God can use us to change this earth! Will we heed the warning and the promise of John the Baptist. Will we choose to repent, to change, to see ourselves and the world radically differently? Let us pray that our eyes may see through the eyes of Christ!