

The Church's prayer for Sunday 5th December

Almighty God,
purify our hearts and minds,
that when your Son Jesus Christ comes again as
judge and saviour
we may be ready to receive him,
who is our Lord and our God.

Bible Readings and Reflection for Sunday 5th December

A reading from 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. ²But 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; ³he 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. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

A Gospel reading from 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 Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as 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.

⁵ 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;

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

A reflection from The Ven Alex Hughes, Archdeacon of Cambridge

The word Advent means "coming", and in the Christian calendar Advent refers to the coming of Jesus at Christmas, and also his second coming, when his glory will be revealed to all people.

A lot of the Bible readings set for Advent are quite disturbing, and today's are no exception. Listen again to this from the prophet Malachi:



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 a fuller's 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.

And what about this from Luke's Gospel:

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.

The prophet speaks of a time of purification, when everything that is not godly will be burned away, while the Gospel speaks of a time of great upheaval. And although I think we are supposed to understand these verses in a poetic way, so that they are not to be taken literally, the message is still clear: the coming of God is a testing time, a challenging time, a time of radical change.

On the whole I think that nowadays we tend to play down the testing and challenging demand for change. In our culture, you're not allowed to interfere with what people get up to, unless it becomes obviously harmful or dangerous. You don't dare to criticise the way people live and the choices they make. Rightly or wrongly, you don't want to be accused of being offensive or politically incorrect. And however frustrating this might seem at times, when we think other people are making a silly mess of things, I'm sure we all like the fact that we can do more or less whatever we want, and think whatever we like, without anyone trying to make us do or think differently. It is surely a good thing that we have this freedom. And it is probably a good thing that we are not free to cast our prejudices willy-nilly upon other people.

But the danger is that if no one is allowed to question us, or challenge us, we might start to believe that we are always right, and that we don't need to question or challenge ourselves; we don't need to change anything about the way we are: it's all just fine. This is surely a bad situation to be in.

The philosopher Socrates said that "an unexamined life is not worth living," and Christian spirituality makes a similar point. If you just live however you feel like living, and never stop to ask why, then you may end up living badly, damaging yourself and other people too. And it is the witness of the Bible, and all the saints, that this is in fact what happens. We all live badly in some ways; and very often we have become so used to the way we live that we can't see that it is a problem. We just take it for granted that what we think and do is more or less ok. To pick up the image from Malachi, we don't imagine that our lives are like rusty metal, in need of a good clean. Or to use the Gospel image, we don't see that the road we are travelling is crooked, and needs to be made straight.



Well maybe I'm just talking to myself now. Maybe you are only too aware of your weakness and failings. But either way – whether you think you're better than you really are, or whether you're very familiar your mistakes - there is good news; because the message of Advent doesn't just stop at telling us that we're all a bit dirty and crooked: it goes on to say that God wants to clean us up and straighten us out. The message of Advent is not one of despair, but of hope. God may be our judge, but he is also our Saviour. God will not leave us in the mess that we've created.

Advent, then, is a time to look forward in hope. But it's a particular kind of hope. It isn't dreamy and naïve; it doesn't imagine that God will just wave a magic wand and everything will suddenly be alright. Instead, Advent hope knows that it's in for a bumpy ride: it understands that in order for God to come a lot of things have got to change, and that change is often hard and slow. So Advent hope is an act of faith and faithfulness. It is an act of faith because it trusts that God's promises will be fulfilled – that the wicked will be made righteous and the crooked straight; that despite all appearances to the contrary, God will bring all things into a perfect unity in Christ. And it is an act of faithfulness because it is prepared to go through change, to expose itself to the refiner's fire, and to let itself be pushed and pulled into shape.

It's not surprising, is it, that Christmas is more popular than Advent? In fact, Advent has been all but forgotten in our culture. But Christmas without Advent is a fairy tale – easy, painless, but ultimately hopeless too. It must not be so for us, who know that there is no short-cut to God's coming. We must walk the long Advent road, for we believe that it is the path that leads to God's eternal kingdom. Amen.