

ADVENT SERMON 6'12'15 'The prophets',

(Michael Fluck, Reader, St. Faith's)

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen †

Part 1: Introduction

The theme for the second of our series of Advent sermons is '*the Prophets*'. The dictionary tells us that a *prophet* is someone who foretells (or 'prophesies') the future, usually on the basis of some special expertise. For example, there are people who make a living by *prophesying* the outcome of horse races.

I wonder if anyone here likes a flutter on the horses? I'm *not* a betting man. This goes back to my last year at school in Cheltenham. A few of us succumbed to the temptation to 'bunk off' in order to work at the race course, stamping down the turf between races. There, I was persuaded by a school-friend (who seemed to know about such things), to bet on a few horses ridden by famous jockeys. These were widely *prophesied* to do well. They didn't! - I lost *all* my money. That was enough to put me off betting.

To add insult to injury, a teacher later saw the racing on TV, and *recognised* us! We were called before the head, severely reprimanded, and formally *suspended* for three days. (*The shame of it!*).

As my mother used to say, '*be sure your sins will find you out!*'.

Part 2: Prophets

And that's a consistent message of the Old Testament prophets. Prophets held a highly respected *role* in ancient Jewish society.

It was through the ancient Jews that God chose to establish a *relationship* with human beings (not because they were especially *deserving*):

- Around 2,000BC he established a *Covenant* with the childless couple Abraham and Sarah, promising that their descendants would be as numerous as grains of sand, and that through them *all the nations of the earth* would be blessed. He would be their God and they would be his people. (Like a loving parent and child).

- Then, 600 years later, this Covenant was renewed and extended with Moses on Mt Sinai while God led his people from slavery in Egypt - and they *committed* themselves to live by what we call the 'ten commandments'.

At that time, God made it known that he would speak directly *only* with *Moses*, but that *later* he would speak through *Prophets* (via dreams and visions). And Deuteronomy tells us that the *role* of *Prophet* was formally *created* just before Moses died.

These prophets were God's *spokesmen* (and women):

- giving an *insight* into the will of God;
- fearlessly *proclaiming* God's messages to both people and rulers;

- *encouraging* them to obey God's commandments, (and to avoid the superstitious idol worship of their neighbours the Canaanites);
 - and when they *did* lapse, *threatening* terrible *consequences* and *calling* on them to *repent* and change their ways.

And, boy, *did* they keep lapsing! A recurrent theme throughout the OT is their lamentable tendency to *forget* their *Covenant* relationship with God, to stop *living* according to God's *values* - reducing their faith to mere *superstition*, treating God like some kind of good-luck charm which would ensure good harvests and healthy children provided you performed the appropriate *rituals* and *sacrifices*.

[I wonder if we're *all* inclined to treat God like that sometimes?]

God's *response*, communicated through his prophets, is *clear* and *consistent*, e.g.:

- Amos relays *this* message from God:

"I hate your festivals, ... I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise of your songs; *Instead let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

(Amos 5:21-24);

- the prophet Micah writes:

"... what does the LORD *require* of you *but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*" (Micah 6:1-4, 6-8);

- while Isaiah *spells it out* in more detail:

“your appointed festivals have become a burden to me, ; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; [....]; **cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek *justice*, rescue the *oppressed*, defend the *orphan*, plead for the *widow*”**. (Isaiah 1:11-17)

Echoing the prophets, Jesus himself angrily tells the religious authorities of *his* own time: "*Go and learn what this means, 'I desire **mercy, not sacrifice.**'*" (Matthew 9:13)

It's a sad fact that, no matter how we try, we humans seem unable to avoid *separating* ourselves from God (and from all that God *wants* for us and for the rest of creation) - either through what we *do* or *say*, or because of what lies unspoken in our *hearts*.

Against this background, Isaiah and Malachi *prophesied* that God, (because of *his* goodness and love rather than any *merit* on *our* part), would act decisively to *rescue* us – to make us *fit* to participate in his *remaking* of creation. In doing so, they appear to foretell the coming of John the Baptist, and of Jesus himself. For instance, in the chapter that follows our reading, Malachi promises the return of 'Elijah' - which Jesus himself subsequently explains is really a reference to John the Baptist. (Matthew 11:14 & Matthew 17:11-12).

Part 3: Malachi

Malachi, from which our OT reading is taken, is the final book of the OT, written 400 years before Jesus. Just 80 years earlier, the Jewish

people had finally been allowed to return from their long Exile in Babylon, to rebuild Jerusalem and its Temple.

But *now*, Malachi tells us, they're falling back into bad old ways. Their *priests'* hearts are no longer in their religion, and their casual attitude to worship doesn't encourage the people to respect God. What's more, the *people's* indifference towards *God* is reflected in their callousness towards *each other*. In the verse following our reading, Malachi cites examples and conveys God's *warning*: "I will be swift to bear witness against the *sorcerers*; against the *adulterers*; against those who *swear falsely*; against those who *oppress* the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan; against those who *thrust aside the alien*, and *do not fear me*, says the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 3: 5). It couldn't be much clearer.

Malachi *prophesies* that the day is coming when God will finally *act* to sort things out once and for all. *Justice* and *right* will prevail because God is coming - firstly to *purify*, and later to *judge*. As our Gospel reading from Luke indicates, the NT sees this as foretelling the coming of John the Baptist, and then of Jesus himself. (*And anyone familiar with Handel's wonderful choral work, the 'Messiah', will recall how it draws on the words of the prophets Malachi and Isaiah*).

In today's reading, Malachi prophesies:

- firstly, that God will send a *messenger* to *prepare the way*, to change the *hearts* of the people - calling on them to *remember* their solemn *covenant* agreement with almighty God (as we've seen, Jesus himself interprets this as a reference to John the Baptist);

- secondly, that another messenger will come who is 'the *Lord*' himself. *He will purify* - just as a refiner's furnace *melts* iron or gold ore so that the impurities float to the surface and can be skimmed off.

This won't be a *comfortable* experience: 'get ready to change your lives' is Malachi's message from God. (Is that the message for us too?).

Malachi foretells that a Day of *Judgement* is coming, '*the great day of the Lord*'. For some, he says, the fierce brilliance of that day will burn like fire, but those who *honour God* will *rejoice* in its *healing* rays.

Part 4: Advent + the Second Coming

We're now in the season of *Advent*, when we look towards the *coming* of Jesus, God's promised Messiah, which the *prophets* had long predicted. We tend to regard Advent as a lead-up to *Christmas*, to the *birth* of our Lord (all those Advent calendars and carol services).

But that's only *half* the picture. The Christian church has always been clear that Advent is the time when we *also* look forward to the '*Second Coming*' - the promised *return* of Jesus - not as a helpless baby, or as a tortured figure dying on a cross, but this time as *king* and *judge*.

The *Creed*, which we say each Sunday to affirm our faith, includes the words: ***“he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. From thence, he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”***

The way theologians have *Interpreted* this varies, but a number of things are clear:

- It was an important issue for the gospel writers, for St Paul, and above all for Jesus himself – so *we* would do *well* not to *ignore* it!
- Jesus looked towards a *future* "coming" when this world-order would be done away with and a completely new state of affairs would be inaugurated.
- And there's a strong emphasis on judgment at the time of Jesus' return. This is echoed in Jesus' **parable of the talents** (reported in Matthew + Luke's gospels) - when Jesus *returns* there will be an *accounting* of what we have done with the talents that he has given us. (How far have we tried to put them to good *use*, rather than simply *hoarding* them?)
- Jesus makes it clear that his coming will take place at a time when people aren't expecting it, so he urges his followers to be *watchful*, ready at all times (Luke 17).

We might do well to heed the words of the old Scout motto - '*be prepared!*'

It all sounds a bit worrying; but St Paul insists that the awe-inspiring nature of the Coming, and its unexpectedness, shouldn't make *believers* view it with apprehension.

We may *take heart* from the words of John's gospel:

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (3: 16);

and also from Paul's words to the Philippians:

"I thank God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy [...] for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel. ⁶I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ..... for all of you share in God's grace" (1: 3-11).

Let's take that to heart, and try to *live out* the good news in our day to day lives.

Amen †