

**Advent 2**  
**5/12/2021**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Malachi 3:1-4**  
**Philippians 1:3-11**  
**Luke 1:68-79**

**Being Made Worthy for the Coming of God**

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

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The season of advent begins again the telling of the story of the life of Jesus. Everything in the Christian tradition orbits this story, everything is drawn into its gravity. All of the texts which we have received from the Jewish tradition; all of the experiences of the earliest Christian communities; all of our own lives, find their centre in the story of this one life. The singular person Jesus of Nazareth: who was born, who lived and taught, was crucified, and was raised. We retell this story over and over and over again, until it shapes who we are, until it seeps into our souls, until we feel it in our bones.

This is one of the mysteries of the Christian tradition, that this singular story rooted in the first century, in a particular geography, somehow resonates across history and in quite different places. As we begin to anticipate again the coming of God in the person of Jesus, then, we are invited not only to remember an event fixed in the past. Rather, we are invited to pay attention to how the story of the coming of Jesus in Bethlehem is a story which reaches out and has something to say about the coming of God in our own times and places.

We might view the task of Advent as no less a time of self-reflection and preparation as the time of Lent before Easter. A time to not only swell with the joy of the assured arrival of God's beloved child into the world 2,000 years ago. But also a time to reflect on whether we are ready to receive this child, to receive this God in the world and lives in which we actually live.

It is striking to me the sharp contrast between the texts scheduled for reading during advent, and the general vibe of the season. While many of us face busy work and social lives at this time of year, we also look forward to end of year parties, gatherings with family, and the celebration of Christmas itself. The anticipation is one of effervescent joy.

And yet in the midst of this season we hear from the scriptures foreboding warnings about the coming Son of Man; the Gospel reading next week will have John the Baptist castigating a brood of vipers. This week we hear from the Hebrew Scriptures a warning from Malachi — whose name is literally rendered "the messenger" — about the refining judgement of God; and from the New Testament, a call from the imprisoned Paul inviting the Church in Philippi to share in his ministry of suffering.

If there is any antidote to the story of Christmas falling into sanitised nostalgia, robbed of its world-shaking power, perhaps it is simply taking the time to truly listen to the Scriptures.

The question which the Scriptures seem to press upon us — at least the question which has been pressed upon me is: are you ready to receive Jesus into the world? Have you become worthy of the coming of God?

Of course we cannot make ourselves worthy, God alone can and indeed will do that. But Malachi offers us a warning: the road to becoming worthy to receive God is fraught, it can be painful.

"Who can endure the day of [the Messenger's] coming?" says the prophet.

On the road towards Christmas it is common to read Malachi as a primarily Christian prophecy. Particularly as a prophetic prediction about the second coming of Elijah in John the Baptist, with his proclamation of divine judgement. It's worth recognising that perhaps Malachi saw himself as this messenger from the Lord — indeed Malachi literally means "messenger." The point is that the message of God's judgement is not found once in John by the Jordan, but found throughout God's faithful journey with God's people. It is found today.

It is found when, like in Malachi's day, our worship becomes self-serving, when our devotion to God becomes confused with projections of ourselves, holding onto our own nostalgia, or pursuing our own aesthetic desires. This must be burned away, so that we see again the pure riches of our worship and devotion before the God who comes.

So too in the words of the Apostle Paul. It is easy to hear a consoling word of friendship: "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you..." says the Apostle. And yet, this joy arises for the imprisoned Paul precisely because the Philippians, "share in God's grace ... both in ... imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel." Indeed we might even hear in the joyous memory of Paul in prison an attempt at taking his mind off his immediate plight. Something like thinking of better days in the midst of a storm. Rather than consoling, Paul is drawing the Church in Philippi more deeply into an appreciation of his own sufferings. The prayer of Paul that the Philippians would abound in knowledge, to become pure and blameless for the day of Jesus Christ, is not a prayer that should be taken lightly. It is the prayer of a prisoner reminding his fellow co-workers that focusing on "what is best," or better: focusing on what truly matters, means being willing to lose everything, even freedom, for the sake of the Gospel.

The call of the Gospel is not a simple task. The coming of God into the world — into *this* world, here and now, the world we live in today — is disruptive, and world-shaking.

God comes to us in the beloved child Jesus Christ. God meets us in our fumbling praise, in the compromised ways we live out our faith. And this is both a joy and a challenge. We must be ready to hear the message of God which challenges God's people across time and place. We must be ready to set aside what does not matter, to attend to what truly does.

Hear then the Good News:

In Jesus Christ God fully enters the world, takes on our humanity, bears with our burdens, stands with us in our imprisonment by the forces of sin and death — those forces which stand opposed to the reach and reign of God's love: mercy and justice, peace and joy. And on the cross Jesus encounters death face-to-face and there defeats it. Releasing us and all creation from the grip of hate and violence, oppression and cruelty.

And this then is the challenge of this Good News: now refined by the salvific work of Jesus, we must begin again to examine what is still being refined away; and how we will become co-workers with all those who share our imprisoned state.

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