

Anglicare Sunday

Rev'd Ben Falcon

Advent 2 (2) -Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:1-11;
Luke 3:1-6

Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell!

These are the Four Last Things that traditionally set the themes for the Four Sundays of the Advent Season. Most churches nowadays theme their Advent Sundays as Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love – slightly less intimidating topics!

But we do see in our Advent readings an echo of these weighty, intimidating themes of old.

“Prepare the way of the Lord,” cries John the Baptist, “hills are being flattened, valleys are being raised up”.

Confess your sins and be ready to meet your God!

Being ready to meet God is a heavy thing! We'll hear more from John the Baptist next week, but already we're getting the message that he has no time for complacency or self-satisfaction. There is an urgency to his message and ministry.

Malachi in our reading from the Old Testament warns that God is like a refiner's fire and fuller's soap. God will refine us like Silver and Gold is refined.

And here the harshness of judgment is tempered – we see the balance of God's love and judgment. There is no room for glossing over our brokenness, no room for self-satisfaction and self-deception. But there is no reason to wallow in miserable self-abasement and self-pity either. God sees the silver and the gold in us. God wants to bring that beauty to its full perfection. God can see that we are truly made for Goodness and Godness, and God wishes to burn away all that

obscures that Godness in us.

In one sense the warning words of John the Baptist in our gospel reading are directed at us, we need to repent to receive the forgiveness of sins that God freely offers. In another sense, we are here to channel John the Baptist to those around us. We are to, in the words of our canticle, 'Go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.'

And the canticle finishes with these exquisitely beautiful words,

*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.*

It's not doom and gloom about God coming to punish us. God's judgment is needed on our world and on us as imperfect individuals. But that judgment is purgative not punitive, merciful not malicious.

God is a God of tender compassion, bringing the warm, welcoming light of dawn to dispel the darkness and to guide our feet into the way of peace. There is no escaping that light. It will flood our world as surely as every sunrise does each day. Things will be revealed as they really are. We will see ourselves as we really are. The brokenness of our society will be seen as it really is. This is a serious thing but a joyful thing, a hope filled prospect. Our world is broken. It needs the warmth of God to flood it. It needs the cleansing fire of God's judgment to burn away the bad and bring to full lustre the good, the true, and the beautiful that we glimpse now behind the dross of sin.

I was telling a colleague earlier this week about the moment I first realised our society didn't do enough to support people

in need. I grew up naively thinking that if someone lost their work or became homeless there was always a government agency or charity like Anglicare to help them out and get them back on track. I am one of seven siblings, and whilst mum often used to bellow at us to stop wasting water and get out of the shower, we didn't have a materially deprived childhood. There was always enough food, mostly bought in bulk, and we never had to worry about a roof over our heads.

In one of my first jobs (I think I was just 18), I used to catch two buses to work. I'd get one bus from the Paradise Interchange and ride the 0-Bahn into the city, then catch another bus from Currie Street out to my workplace west of the city in Flinders Park.

Anyway, one morning I was standing on Currie St waiting for my second bus and noticed a teenage boy sitting with piece of cardboard asking for money. So I bobbed down and chatted to him, asked what was happening for him and why he was stuck on the street. He told me he'd had to leave home because of family violence, and he couldn't go back. I asked if he'd been to Hutt St Centre or Anglicare, that there must be someone who could help him. But he said he'd tried everywhere and no one had somewhere safe for him to go. My bus pulled up so I hastily gave him the cash I had on me, and jumped on the bus. And then I sat on my bus seat and cried. I had never before been confronted with the harsh reality of poverty or the harsh reality that our society doesn't do enough to help people in real crisis.

That moment was one of the things that made me consider a job at Anglicare in 2017. As with any human organisation, it has had its good moments and its bad. But it has been a privilege to spend 8 years working for an organisation that tries to embody the love and mercy of God as we have found it in Jesus.

Our overarching vision as an organisation is 'Justice, Respect, and Fulness of Life for All' taken from Jesus' words

in John 10:10 "I came that they may have life and have it in its fulness." So, whilst we do take funding from the government to run many of our services, we are seeking to embody a Christian way of serving those in need. We advocate for and with those whose voices aren't being heard. We do what we can to respond to those whom society has overlooked, like that poor young boy I met on Currie Street years ago. And we do that work in partnership with the church at different levels and in a variety of ways. Anglicare is your organisation, an Anglican, Christian organisation, here to embody the values we share in Christ.

There are many areas where we still don't have the resources to respond to some of the intractable issues in our society. We are building new social and affordable homes every year, but we can't fix the housing crisis on our own. Each year we make available suitable homes for families escaping domestic violence but this program is swamped by demand and we have to regularly turn away people we cannot help. We can't fix domestic and family violence on our own.

Advent reminds us of these dark problems that remain in our society. Advent helps us be humble, knowing that only the coming of Christ can dispel the darkness in our hearts and the darkness in our world. Our readings today have introduced the ministry of John the Baptist, so let me conclude with John.

We read in John 1, "there was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The True Light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

May we, like John, find ways in our individual and collective lives to bear witness to that light which is coming into the world to enlighten everyone.

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. Amen