



Opening Responses for Advent

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

Let there be light!

On those living in the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

Let there be light!

The true light has come into the world to dispel the darkness.

Let there be light!

Prayer of Approach

Let us pray:

The people groaned amid the gathering darkness, longing for the 'something' that would change everything, for the dawning of the new day after the long night of exile, for the boiling over of God's life from eternity into time.

The people thirsted and ached for streams of living water, for signs of new life springing up in the deserts of despair, for the change that would free them to be 'at home' with God, but without really knowing what that would mean.

The people preferred their own darkness and shadows to the fire on the earth God's truth brings raining down, but God promised to dwell with them as Emmanuel, Love inhabited humanly, made vulnerable and defenceless.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of Advent,
give us the courage to leave our darkness behind
and the faith to draw near to you,
stepping into the light of your truth, love and hope.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ,
the radical answer to Israel's longings,
and the wellspring of everlasting life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

What does it mean to you to speak God refining a person in the fire?
Is this a positive or frightening image for you, and why?

Prayers of Renewal

God of light,
you call us out of the darkness both
of ignorance of your love
and mistrust of your ways.
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light,
you call us out of the darkness both
of indifference towards the needs of others
and the undervaluing of ourselves.
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light,
you call us out of the darkness both
of unjust ways of ordering the world
and the blind pursuit of self-interest.
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of light and hope,
make us ready to meet with you.
Amen

Readings Malachi 3:1 – 4
Luke 3:1 – 6

Sermon

This week, I have enjoyed watching some of the snooker coverage. It is quite a relaxing thing to have on in the background whilst getting on with other things, and contrary to the opinion of my stepdaughter, I think it can be pretty exciting to watch when matches get close. As someone who occasionally plays snooker myself, it's become clear that frames are more often won or lost not because of a missed pot, but because of a wayward positional shot. Manoeuvring the cue ball into the right place is key as even the most gifted players cannot pot their way out of trouble every time. It's also an extremely demanding skill to master, because it involves understanding the natural angles at which the cue ball moves after hitting the object ball, or a cushion, and how to use spin properly. For those who manage it, the rewards are clear, because it makes it much easier to pot the balls, and build a break. It's a reminder that being in the right place, at the right time, is important if we are to succeed.

Today's Gospel reading concerns somebody who was in exactly the right place and at the right time, to allow God to use him in preparing the way for Jesus' coming. From the historical details Luke provides us with, we can pinpoint the emergence of John the Baptist to either 28 or 29 CE, when his cousin Jesus was around thirty years-old. He appeared in the wilderness, calling all Judeans to be baptised in the River Jordan, the same river Israel crossed over centuries earlier to

enter the Promised Land, after forty years of wilderness wandering. The symbolism was deliberate and powerful – all were invited to join John and prepare the way of the Lord, just as they had once readied themselves to be God's covenant people in Canaan. There is a real sense of vulnerability about what John was asking of them, because the wilderness was a place of testing and hence often of painful self-discovery. What this meant in practical terms was entering fully into his baptism of repentance, offered to anyone who would partake.

Now, the Greek for 'repentance' can be translated as 'turning away'; that is, turning our backs on those things that lead to us 'missing the mark' and failing to live up to all that God created us to be. However, I do wonder if it makes greater sense to think of 'repent' as meaning 'wake up'? Wake up, and take a good look around you. Wake up to the reality of God, to what it means to love God, and love others as ourselves, without qualification. Wake up to the difference *you* could make in the world. Wake up to what God's doing all around you, roll up your sleeves and join in. This sense of repentance, of waking up to the difference we can each make in the world, as we prepare the way for God's love to make the differences it might make, fits neatly with the idea of being in the right place at the right time. After all, we aren't likely to be in the right place if we're asleep on the job!

Stepping back in the story of God's people for a moment and turning to our Old Testament passage throws up some powerful imagery to help us think this through. Malachi was a wake-up call for the people of God. After their return from seventy years of exile within Babylon, hopes were high for a fresh start and new beginnings with God. Yet, as time went on, they'd become somewhat sluggish, in both worship and in their commitment to justice. The first two chapters of Malachi contain various warnings which suggest that the people were 'in the dark' as to what was wrong with their way of living together. Malachi calls for integrity and truthfulness in both worship, and corporate life in general, pointing in our passage toward the 'Messenger of God's

Covenant' coming to prepare the way of the Lord. It is not surprising, then, that Luke used this passage to point towards John the Baptist, though in its original context, Malachi was more concerned with the leadership of the Jerusalem Temple.

The question which the prophet raises about this Messenger – “who can endure the day of his coming?” – leads us into considering what repentance means in this context, which in turn evokes concepts of purity and holiness. Now, there is clearly a need to be careful in how we talk about purity, as looking at the Christian tradition reveals how it has often been associated more with power and control, than with an authentic holiness. What's more, most of us at some point in time have encountered a 'holier than thou' person, and it is not much fun! Consequently, we need to regard this reading with a certain amount of care and caution. It should not surprise us, however, that the vivid imagery Malachi draws upon in this passage is far from comfortable; it was meant to be challenging and thought-provoking.

The dominant picture painted by Malachi imagines God as a skilled metalworker, expertly using his blast furnace to dislodge impurities, or taking a hammer to the metal at lower heats, yielding purified and precious gold and silver. Now, the valuable end products are clearly worth all of that sweaty and labour-intensive work involved on God's part, in what is a purposefully macho divine image. However, this is also a picture I find somewhat unsettling – do we really want to think of God beating all the impurities out of us? A more familiar image of using high temperatures to make something clean is the sterilisation of medical equipment, but that isn't actually much better – the notion that holiness renders us all sterile and bland is not overly attractive! Hence, I reckon that the second, and slightly less prominent, image in our Malachi reading, pointing to the Messenger's actions as being like harsh laundry soap, is key. Thinking of God as a washerwoman, scrubbing the stains out of my dirty underwear, makes me cringe in my bones; it reminds me that there is no holding anything back from

God. Tough as it is, however, it does reflect the reality of human life, in all of its ambiguity and complication and messiness, showing that God isn't afraid of any of these things. Given how Jesus spent much of his time with people that the 'respectable' folk considered impure, I reckon it offers us a more realistic and life-giving viewpoint on what it means to be holy. Rowan Williams helpfully sums this up: holiness stems from “the victory of God's faithfulness *in the midst* of disorder and imperfection”. Moreover, we're holy not because of anything we do or don't do, but because God chooses to see us as holy. In other words, holiness is a gift, a product of a freely-given and undeserved grace overflowing from the heart of God.

So, it makes sense to me to think of Malachi calling the people back to God in a way which requires integrity and honesty even when it's costly or painful, but also recognising that the work of refinement, in whatever ways we picture it, is ultimately God's work. The image of God as the washerwoman illustrates how God isn't afraid to get her hands dirty in the process, and the One whose way John the Baptist was preparing, centuries after Malachi's stark wake-up call to Israel, represents in his very person God's ultimate act of getting her hands dirty. The baptism of repentance John proclaimed in the wilderness was meant to help Israel to be in the right place at the right time, by letting go of those things which made them sluggish, in both worship and in their commitment to justice. Luke tells us that the Temple folk couldn't understand that this unlikely setting of the wilderness rather than the established territory of the Temple was that right place, but that's exactly where John dared them to venture, taking the holy risk of letting God shape and change them.

For our part, being in the right place at the right time, and so waking up to the difference(s) we each might make, requires being properly prepared and getting ready. It means having a bit of a spiritual clear-out with God's help, but this is not always easy. It might confront us with aspects of ourselves of which we're ashamed, and that we look

to keep hidden from ourselves, from other people, and maybe even from God. However, God doesn't encourage us all to engage in this Advent task in order to beat the 'impurities' out of us, or to leave us sterile and bland as a result. Rather, God's love works in us, so that we may have life in all its fullness and in turn be a blessing to others. God simultaneously says a crucifying 'no' to those things that get in the way of radiating out the light of God's love, but God also says a resurrecting 'YES' to our true selves. Holiness isn't, therefore, about somehow becoming 'less' than we were before, but instead is about fulfilling our potential as beloved children of God.

John the Baptist was in the right place and the right time to help the people of God prepare the way to encounter the One who comes to meet us, even when that becomes deeply costly. To quote a famous U2 song, Love was coming to town, and thus nothing would ever be the same again. Getting into that right place, and waking up to those differences we might make, is the point of that waiting time which is Advent. Returning back to where we started today, snooker players take many years of practice to master manoeuvring the cue ball into the right place to be ready for the next shot. Even people like Ronnie O'Sullivan, who are blessed with incredible natural abilities, have to spend hours a day on the practice table. Advent is a period in which we can practice getting ourselves into the right place, ready for God to meet us and wake us up to what truly matters – that we are loved beyond anything that we could imagine, and that we're called to go out and share that love with the world. Friends, may we be ready to prepare the way of the Lord, and to make his paths straight, so that the world might know the Love that came down at Christmas. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God of Advent hope,
as we wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus into the world,
as the one whom John the Baptist pointed us towards,

we bring our prayers for others to you.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are feeling overwhelmed right now,
and struggling to find your comfort and peace in their lives.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who've lost loved ones in this past year,
and all those who are unwell in mind, body or spirit.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who have lost livelihoods and businesses,
and all who have been made homeless during this period.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who work in our emergency services,
in the NHS and in social care, as winter pressures build up.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all those who are aware of their need to change,
that you will bring renewal, hope and transformation.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who feel they have forgotten how to be joyful,
that they might reconnect with your joy during this Advent.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,

we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing