

Advent of the Peace Child

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 9 December 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Advent 2C

Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 3: 1-18; Song: *Speak To Me* by Rachel Collis

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

Advent is a beautiful time of year to reflect; to reflect not just on our personal spiritual journeys but on our journey together. It is a time full of possibility and peace, imagination and hope. There is always this sense that this year, this season in ministry together, we could indeed be who God has called us to be.

Meister Eckhart, the medieval Christian mystic proclaimed, "*We are all called to be mothers of God, for God is always waiting to be born.*"

On this second Sunday of Advent, we are called to prepare for this mystery, for God to be born in us again. Because the incarnation, in the end, is not just about Jesus alone, but about us. How will we respond to the call to make the love of God real in the world?

As everyone goes a little crazy at this time, as people stress themselves out at work and in their families and even at church, the church at its best, provides a space for contemplation and for grace in Advent. For calm in the midst of the chaos. In the church we are reminded that preparing for the birth of Emmanuel, God with us, is in essence, about making space in our lives for Christ to be born; for making space to experience incarnation in Christa/community. In just and loving relationships.

We are preparing the way for the Christ Child to come into our homes and into our hearts. However, we are not worshipping an eternal baby. We are preparing for the coming of the adult Jesus, the one who comes bearing hope and good news, forgiveness and peace, not just for us but for everyone. This eternal presence speaks to us, even in the midst of our doubts and our changes – in the way that Rachel's song reminds us: *that still God's voice remains/ in the touch of a lover's hand/ where the water meets the land/ in the company of friends/ in the wine and the bread/ in the face of a stranger/ in the frailty of the manger.* We say to God: you speak to me, in faith we proclaim, you speak to me.

Another song that's been important to me over many years is the Carol that we're going to sing after this reflection: Peace Child. It reminds us that the infant in the manger was born into a world of oppression, occupation and violence – bearing God's dream of peace.

Jesus lived in a time when the Jewish people were hoping for a Messiah who would liberate them from Rome, Rome being the latest oppressive empire in a long string of oppressive empires that had subjugated the Jewish people.

Although the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the messiah is a key theme in the New Testament, Jesus did not fit the typical profile of messiah. That messiah was, first of all, a warrior king or prince, who was to defeat the enemies of Israel. But there is little if anything in the Gospel portrait of Jesus that accords with the Jewish expectation of a militant messiah.

Jesus and his community of friends diverged from the traditional hope of what would liberate them. They were still fundamentally Jewish people, but they were part of a paradigm shift in first-century Jewish thought.

Jesus' resistance to imperialism was unequivocally non-violent. In the birth story in Luke's gospel which we will hear in a couple of weeks, this Peace Child incarnates not Christianity against Judaism, but Jewish transformative covenant against Roman imperial power.

For the Romans, the Emperor Augustus was proclaimed as Rome's Peace-Bringer, with peace coming through violent victory. But Jesus became God's Peace-Bringer with peace through non-violent justice.

Jesus also created another fundamental paradigm shift within Jewish expectation, moving from hope in a future divine intervention to a realisation of present divine - human collaboration. God with us doesn't just mean God present with us. It means God moving with us, acting with us, and us with God

We anticipate peace in Advent by collaborating with the Divine in making peace.

For this Sunday the compilers of the lectionary have included the rather obscure prophet Malachi, alongside the story of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist proclaims a message of repentance. He shares a vision of righteousness fulfilled: crooked paths made straight and rough ways made smooth. His call is for change today, so that tomorrow the hope of justice may be fulfilled.

He calls the people, in no uncertain terms, to prepare. To prepare for a different way of being in the community of God's people, to prepare for change.

Malachi and John both remind us that the promise of Advent is not saccharine or easy. The word of God came to Malachi as a word of promise. It's good news - but there is also a degree of uneasiness in the promise. There are some elements of the promise that we would like to have fulfilled, and other elements that we would just as soon leave aside.

This blend of joy and apprehension at the prospect of the promise fulfilled is clearly reflected in verse 2: "*But who can endure the day of that coming, and who can stand when that One appears? That day will be like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.*"

We might well respond to this promise by wondering exactly what is meant by the refining. What exactly in my life, what exactly in our church, is in need of refining? And how much will it hurt? What might we have to give up (or worse, what might be taken from us) before we would be refined like gold and silver?

We want what Advent has to offer. We yearn to be the bearers of God in our world, and yet we are not always ready to face the pain that comes with new birth. If we go down this path, there will be new life, new love, and we will never be the same again.

Malachi's name means 'Messenger.' Like John the Baptist, he had a powerful critique of the status quo to share. A critique, and a call, about personal transformation and about the renewal of the political, religious and economic life of the community. (It is in that context that I chose Martin Luther King as the image on our posters to go alongside that of the birth of John the Baptist.)

Malachi was a prophet from the post-exilic period of the second temple, in the first half of the fifth century BCE. He prophesied after the return of the Exiles from Babylon to Judah. They were delighted to be liberated and returned. But now things weren't going so well. Enough time had gone by since the return, that it seems that honeymoon of the restoration was over.

In Malachi's time, the people are grumbling about God and there is discontent.

Malachi is an interesting prophet, because he didn't suppress the discontent. He enabled people to face their questions, to live the questions, of faith.

In the two chapters that precede today's lectionary reading, it's all about questions. Honest questions, hard questions, and a commitment to working them through.

Malachi had some really good questions for his time: *How has God loved us? Where is the God of justice? How shall we return to God?* Malachi poses twenty-two questions in just fifty-five verses.

Malachi is the go-between. He also articulates God's questions to the priests and the people and he anticipates their responses.

It's an interesting prophetic style. Not denouncing, perhaps the way that John the Baptist did, but employing a deliberative question-and-answer methodology.

The prophet and the people are working it out together. The conversation is candid, confrontational and engaging. The prophet and the people are partners in critical reflection on the nature of God, and partners in the self-critical reflection on the conduct of God's people.

Malachi's questions, 500 years before the birth of Jesus are Advent questions.

Advent questions our readiness and willingness for Christ's coming, for God being born in us again. Advent questions our openness to the transformation of the church, of the world, of our very selves. Advent questions if we are in fact willing to be God bearers.

Malachi calls the people of Israel from iniquity to a new "*integrity and uprightness*," and a renewed "*reverence*" for God's "*covenant of life and well-being*." (Mal. 2:5-6).

This text invites us to ask some good questions about what kind of church we want to be – in the day and weeks and months and years that lie ahead of us.

Malachi's prophecy invites us to think about our prayers. Are our prayers prophetic as well as personal? In our Advent prayers, are we paying attention to injustice, corruption and violence as well as to our own needs and anxieties about the season of Christmas?

Three years now, after the Paris climate Agreement, when world leaders gathered to discuss the ecological fate of the world and commit their nations to lower carbon emissions, what does repentance look like?

In a context of global inequality in which those who are farthest from centres of power often suffer the most from climate change, what would justice look like now?

Ten days ago, the younger generation of Australian citizens took these advent matters into their own hands, holding the School Strike for Climate Change. Thousands of Australian students defied calls by the Prime Minister to stay in school and instead marched on the nation's capital cities and regional centres, demanding an end to political inertia around climate change.

The Prime Minister's comments inspired some profound and witty responses that students wrote on the placards they carried to the march. One of them that I saw said: "*we'd be in class if you did your job*"; and I did rather enjoy: "*I've seen smarter cabinets at Ikea*."

Yesterday thousands of people turned out to #StopAdani marches around the country to protest the Indian mining giant's controversial Carmichael coal mine. Building on the momentum of the school strike, protesters young and old, gathered in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Cairns to call on both the government and the Labor party to stop the mine's construction and to take meaningful action on climate change.

Malachi and John the Baptist remind us that preparation for Advent involves examining the casual way that we live our lives, so often ignoring what they understood as God's promised judgment. Judgement can be an uncomfortable idea for progressive Christians. But, I think, following Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in the series that we're doing on First Light, when they invited us to think about God's judgement not as coming upon us from outside, but as the consequences of the choices that we make as human beings.

We live in a time when many (and we included) accept lies as truth. We accept the abuse and exploitation of our refugee and asylum seeker neighbours. We participate in the abuse of the earth. We refuse God's justice and peace.

God has sent us messengers and prophets. In Advent, we are called again to prepare the way for the salvation for people and for planet.

It is a demanding call. But, in responding to this call to be an Advent people, we are never left alone. In the promises of the prophets, in Malachi, in John the Baptist, in Martin Luther King Junior and all of the other people who have spoken this word to God's people, God's promise of restoration and refining is sure. We will be re-formed in God's image.

No matter how good we feel about what lies before us, and no matter of how anxious we are about the change that awaits us, we are not alone.

Here is a promise, which will not change even while our questions, our doubts, our experiences of the Divine speaking to us all change. We live in a world that has been forever shaped by the Advent that became Incarnation. Emmanuel, God with us.

Hear the good news,

not just for Jesus' people, long ago,

but for us,

Hear this Good News

the promise of a child of peace

given for the world that God so loves.

Amen. So may it be.