

ADVENT 2 05-12-21 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Malachi 3:1-4; Song of Zechariah; Philippians 1:1-11; Luke 3:1-6

Luke 3.1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

On the second Sunday of Advent we remember the prophets, so our first reading was from the prophet Malachi. We don't know much about him, except that he wrote to the people who had returned from the Exile and rebuilt the Temple after 515 BC.

Then for the psalm we had the Song of Zechariah, spoken after the birth of John the Baptist by his dad. He prophesied about his baby son, that he would grow up to be a prophet who would go before the Lord to prepare his ways and to tell people how to get right with God.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, St Paul prayed that the people would grow in overflowing love. He seems to be saying that as their love for God and one another grows they will become pure and blameless, ready for the day of Christ's return.

Finally, the reading from Luke's Gospel introduced the adult John the Baptist as he began his prophetic ministry around the River Jordan. We will hear more from John next week.

Prophets say hard things and are often unpopular- to the extent that many prophets in history have been put in prison or executed. Those in power often do not like criticism, do not like to be questioned, and will do everything they can to shut down critics and questioners.

Malachi warned the people of his time that they would be judged; even the priests in the Temple would be judged, and if you read on a few verses he says this, speaking for God:

"Then I will bring you to justice. I will be an expert witness and testify about the evil things people do. I will speak out against those who do evil magic or commit adultery. I will speak out against those who make false promises and cheat their workers and don't pay them the money they promised. I will testify against those who don't help strangers, or widows and orphans. And I will testify against those who don't respect me." This is what the Lord All-Powerful said.

More than two and a half thousand years ago, God was calling out those who claimed to be believers and yet were living immorally, underpaying workers, not caring for the disadvantaged, and neglecting to show hospitality to strangers and foreigners.

There are still prophets today, although they tend not to wear camel-hair or eat locusts and wild honey. Today's prophets speak truth to power in different ways, as journalists and commentators, artists and musicians, poets and authors. Prophets may be found in organisations such as Anglicare and in social justice committees; and they may be scientists, warning of the effects of climate change or the extinction of species.

ABC local radio has been raising money for Anglicare this week; the money raised will be used to help people experiencing homelessness. It is estimated that over 9,000 Western Australians experience homelessness every night, a third of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.

What did God say again about caring for the poor and disadvantaged people in our communities?

And what did God say about showing hospitality and caring for strangers and foreigners?

The recent bombing of Gaza and the escalation of tensions between Israel and Palestine can make peace feel more distant than ever, especially for children affected by the conflict. Through the Christmas Bowl, we can help children heal from their trauma and rebuild their childhoods.

Here pictures were shown on the screen

- This is a little Palestinian girl standing in the rubble of her home in the Gaza strip.
- Here a health worker is giving iron to a little girl suffering anaemia
- This is a young boy drawing pictures during a session with a therapist to help him recover from trauma
- Aisha's husband is unemployed due to the economic crisis in Gaza, so they have very little money for food or medicine. Christmas Bowl supports healthcare workers like the one pictured here with Aisha and her children.

The suffering in Gaza may tempt us to simply blame the warring parties there. But perhaps the message of Malachi is for us, if we fail to protect the most vulnerable in our world. Through the Christmas Bowl, we play our part in inverting the usual power structures. Through us, God makes the crooked paths straight and the rough ways smooth.

Malachi rebuked those who called themselves believers but did not live like believers. Integral to the role of the Church is to be a prophetic voice- to call out those who claim to believe but act in ways that contradict or ignore the commandments of God.

Another prophet, Micah, said this:

"God has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?"

Our world needs courageous prophets as much today as it ever did. Lest we despair, we remember the beautiful words of Zechariah:

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The Lord be with you.