

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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## **ADVENT 3**

**13<sup>th</sup> December 2015**

Malachi 3:1-7

Luke 3:1-18

Throughout Advent we are following the pattern of God's dealing with humanity as it repeats in ever-increasing circles through the story of the Old Testament. Last week we saw the pattern – God intending to live among his people, being prevented from doing so because of their rebellion, but returning in grace to be with them anyway – as it was enacted in the story of the exodus. We left the people of Israel as the new humanity journeying to the new Eden as they travelled with God's visible presence through the wilderness towards the promised land.

But that, of course was not the end of the story or the final use of the pattern. Once the people reached the promised land and began to settle there, they were not so aware of the tabernacle, although it was still kept and used, housed at Shiloh. The symbolism of God travelling with them was lost when they ceased to travel through the desert, and, as the writer of the book of Judges repeatedly tells us, very soon "everyone did what was right in his own eyes." They lost the sense of God with them, dwelling among them, and they did things in their own way. Their rebellion was finally complete when they came to Samuel, God's prophet, God's representative and demanded a king saying specifically that they wanted to be "like the nations all around them." God had been supposed to be their king. God had set up his people, his clan that was now a nation, to be different from the nations around, and to live with him as their king, doing what he had told them in his law. But they turned from that idea, they rejected God from being king and wanted a human king.

And what a disaster that proved to be. God gave them Saul, who turned from him and became enamoured of his own power – as so many human leaders do. Yes, there was David, who was a king more after God's heart but then there was Solomon who increasingly went his own way, or rather the way of the nations around from whom he had drawn his many wives. It was in the time of Solomon that the tabernacle was superseded by the building of the temple. When it was built the furnishings of the tabernacle, including, and especially the ark of the covenant, the sign of the agreement between God and his people, was placed in it. And then, just as at the dedication of the tabernacle, the glory of God filled the temple so that "the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud.

Placing the ark with its carrying poles still attached and visible within the temple was supposed to remind people that God was still the heart of their national life and travelled on with them. But after Solomon the kingdom divided, most of the people left the worship of the temple altogether, and those who remained to the southern kingdom of Judah also began to turn from God, from acknowledging him as the real King of the nation. There were exceptions, of course, the prophets like Elijah and Elisha, but by

and large the temple became a mere symbol, even a talisman as the people became more and more like the nations around. Rebellion against God need not be dramatic, you see. It need not be a decision to definitely turn away. It can be just a gradual drifting, a gradual assimilating to the attitudes and mores of the world around, so gradual that you hardly notice you are doing it.

God could not dwell with his people and they were taken into exile by the Babylonians. After seventy years a remnant returned and the temple and the city were rebuilt. But no cloud of glory came to this “second temple”. No sense of God being with them, leading them forward filled the lives of the people. In fact, if we read and consider the writing of what is known as the “second temple” period, from about 538 BC onwards, if you want dates, then we see that it is characterised by a sense of divine absence. God is gone and he hasn’t come back. That is the problem faced by the prophet Malachi; the priests are bored and slack in their liturgical duties, because, though they have rebuilt the temple, there is no sense of God having returned.

Many people must have thought that this was it, this was as good as it would ever get, but the prophets and visionaries spoke otherwise. They said that God would return, it was the great theme which ran through the literature of this period. It gave direction not only to thinkers and writers, but also to activists and would-be leaders. It is seen in the temple-cleansing and temple-rebuilding projects of the Maccabees, who threw off Greek rule for a while, and of Herod, who rebuilt or modified the temple yet again, and later of the final, ill-fated rebellion of Simon bar-Kochba in 70 AD, after which many Jews were scattered to the four corners of the world. The fact that God had not yet returned was the constant nagging ache for the faithful, praying the Psalms – many of the Psalms were written in this period – and for the pragmatists and political agitators, who believed that until God came back Israel would not be free of foreign domination.

But, who could abide the day of his coming, and who could stand when he appeared?

This time the pattern of God’s dealings with humanity, as well as being written larger than before took many, many more years to be completed than it had in the past. No wonder Malachi and others foretold that when he did return it would be in terror and judgement. If God had stayed away so long, the people must have grievously displeased him, worse than ever before.

And when God’s messenger, the latter-day Elijah who Malachi also promised, actually came, John the Baptist, he too spoke in terms of judgement. He spoke of the axe lying at the root of the tree, of God coming with his winnowing fork in his hands to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary. He also had good, straightforward advice to people as to how they should live: not to rely on their ancestry for salvation; to share clothing and food with those in need; not to extort and abuse any power their position in society gave them. Good advice, advice designed to soften the judgement.

But God returning to his people in judgement was never in the pattern of how God deals with humanity. The pattern, remember, was that when people rebelled against God and he could not live with them, he returned in grace to do so at last. Not in judgement, but in grace. In love that is totally undeserved. Not all the prophets forgot this – the prophecy of Hosea, for instance is full of it with God even crying out “How can I give you up Israel? How can I abandon you?... *My heart recoils within me; my compassion*

*grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger...for I am God and no mortal.” (Hosea 11:8&9)*

John the Baptist was announcing the coming of God’s Messiah, his anointed one, anointed to represent God on earth, and he wanted the people to understand that the way that they were living and the assumptions they were making based on their ancestry needed to be taken into review. They were not living in the way that showed that they wanted God to live amongst them, and they were resting on un-earned laurels because of their ancestry, because they took the promises made to Abraham and appropriated them for themselves, without also taking the conditions of living with God that accompanied those promises.

John was proclaiming good news, Luke says so, but it was not instant forgiveness and acceptance. Instant grace is too often seen as cheap grace, a gift which is not properly valued. John, like Malachi, wanted the people to take a good hard look at themselves, at the way they thought and the way they lived. God’s love would mean so much more to them if they had first recognised that it was not what they deserved. If they first recognised that what they deserved was judgement, then they would value God’s grace the way it should be.

The same is true for us. God does come to us in grace, and when we come to consider him coming in Jesus, as we will next week, we will see that very clearly. But because we are familiar with this story, with this idea, we can at times take it for granted. One of the ancient purposes of Advent, the time of waiting and preparation is to take time to have a look at ourselves. The way that Advent is marked nowadays, with an increasing number of events and celebrations and things other than Christmas to prepare for, we can crowd this idea out of our lives. But we shouldn’t. It is only when we realise what we as individuals and we as a human society really deserve from our creator, that we can truly wonder at and welcome the gift of his undeserved love.

This week, if you aren’t already, do make time, ten minutes each day, maybe, or a larger block of time one day, to spend time in prayer with God, prayer for yourself and the world. And then sing a Christmas carol or two. Amen.

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