



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's reading

Malachi 3: 1–7 (“The coming messenger”)

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Hark the glad sound! the Saviour comes (CH: 277)

Every new morning (CH: 213)

A little child the Saviour came (CH: 631)

God is love: let heaven adore him (CH: 123)

All my hope on God is founded (CH: 192)

In the Name of the Father and of

It's Advent Sunday: the start of a new church year, and with it an opportunity. So far so good, but if the season of Advent provides us with an opportunity, what *kind* of opportunity do we enjoy from now through until Christmas Day?

Some would say it's an opportunity to celebrate. After all, the tinsel and the toys are in the shops, the festive jingles are on the radio, and in many ways – even in this troubled year of 2020 – it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

But no. We are the Church, and in the Church we know that Christmas is still three Sundays away and more. There is much to do before we arrive in our imaginations at Bethlehem. So, in this time of opportunity, the question remains: what kind of opportunity *do* we have in Advent?

Perhaps our opportunity revolves around the notion of preparation: to make our homes and our hearts ready for the arrival of Jesus. Yes, it's certainly the time of year to prepare ourselves, whether with cake baking or card writing or present buying, or diary filling. But is there more to preparation than just the practical? But is there more to preparation than this?

According to the prophet Malachi, the opportunity we have in the days and weeks to come is nothing less than the possibility of engaging in some timely self-examination: a prospect that may not be entirely appealing, but which may well be very necessary.

If you look up the tiny little book of the prophet Malachi, you will find it in your Bible right at the very, very end of the Old Testament, and just before that single sheet of blank paper that leads us on into the New Testament.

Malachi is thought to have been written about five centuries before the birth of Christ, at the very time when the Hebrew prophets were completing their task and beginning to fall silent. For long enough great names such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel had spoken to the people about God and the coming of a Messiah – *the* Messiah – who would usher in a new age. But then, with Malachi, that swathe of biblical history came to a close and for a full half millennium there would be no more words of warning and caution, words of watching and waiting for the unfolding generations of the Jewish faith.

Malachi, then, holds an important place in our Bible, as the furthest outpost of the Old Testament, with a view towards what would be coming ... or, indeed, with a view to the one who would be coming: the long-promised Messiah of God.

It is Malachi who has come to us today to tell us about the opportunity which is ours in Advent. This Malachi has turned up on the first Sunday of Advent to tell us this, about God:

... he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.

In the 21st century we have a tendency to think of the arrival of Jesus as a lovely, happy thing. But the message of Malachi is not the message of *Away in a manger*, or *Still the night*. It is rather the message of a new arrival who will come to transform the world in massive ways. Minds will be changed. Lives will be turned around. And the way in which people come to understand God will never be the same again. So says this prophet ... and we should listen to his wisdom.

Back in 2003, the Hill family had a great family holiday in Denmark: there was a wonderful day in Legoland; a trip to see the famously preserved remains of the ancient Groubolle Man, and our first encounter with the fantastic Viking game of Kubb – a game which I would happily introduce you to on the church lawn, hopefully before too long!

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

But one of the highlights of our Danish holiday was an afternoon of adventure in a reconstruction of a bronze age village. There were tons of things to learn about, like weaving, and basket-making, but what I liked best was seeing ore being turned as if by magic into molten metal. Little chips of rock, combined with charcoal and lots of heat: at first, nothing much happens, then slowly ... very, very gradually ... little tiny blobs of glistening liquid emerge, and as these blobs get bigger they join up. Before you know it, you have enough molten metal to make an arrowhead or perhaps an emblem for a necklace or the tip of a tool.

It was amazing to see.

That process of smelting takes raw ingredients that look very ordinary, and it transforms them by separating the good, useful, valuable parts of the rock from the useless bits. It's the intense heat that does it, enabling something wonderful to emerge.

More than 2000 years ago, these processes were known to the prophet Malachi. He speaks of them in our reading today, comparing God to a metal refiner. Once again:

... he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver ...

Malachi says God needs us to undergo our own personal smelting: an ordeal by fire to turn us into what we are truly meant to be. That, I think, is a very Old Testament way – a very Hebrew way – of looking at personal transformation. The Jewish faith of the time was greatly dependent on gaining God's purity through sacrificial killing of livestock. And that is not the way we approach our faith today. In many ways, our 21st century world is a very different place.

Still, perhaps Malachi can teach us something important as we start out upon this season of Lent. It may be that we all need to use these days not just to prepare ourselves for Christmas, but to prepare ourselves for the arrival of Christ into our lives.

I recently came across a prayer based on this reading. It went like this:

Lord, your refiner's fire peels away the dross of our self-making. Grant us the discipline and desire to be purified by you.

Maybe we need to ask ourselves some questions this Advent: questions of discipline and true desire as we reflect on the Light of Christ that is coming into our world:

- How ready are we to welcome this Light?
- What difference might the Light make to us?
- How might we ensure that this Light is able to grow within us?
- What would life be like if we failed to wonder at the Light's specialness?
- What ways might we choose to pass the Light on to others?

If these questions sound a little uncomfortable – maybe even painful – to consider, then think about those bronze age smelting processes. The crucible may not be a pleasant place to be, but the raw material that starts out as very ordinary ore ends up as something precious and beautiful: shining bronze; gleaming silver; shimmering gold.

To conclude matters, the writer and pastor Kenneth Samuel poses us a very timely question: *We all may be ready for the happy celebrations that accompany Advent, but according to Malachi, the coming of the Lord is not just about rejoicing, but refinement. Advent is not just a celebratory occasion. Advent is a call for self-examination. Are we ready?*

Amen.

Praying for others

Loving Father,
you sent your Son to be Hope for our world.

You alone know our hopes and our fears,
you alone are able to make us whole.

Help us, Lord, to be a light of Hope to those who are in need,
to be an example of your love and mercy.

In this time of uncertainty, anxiety and distress we remember:
the grandparents whose arms ache to hold their grandchildren,
the families weighed down by financial worries,
the lonely people who long for the comfort of another,
those who are homeless fearing for the future.

When despair numbs our souls, give us Hope.
Bring your Hope to hearts that feel defeated.

Let us know that Hope shines brightest in the darkest moments,
giving the confidence we need to believe that your blessings never end.

With your great Hope in our hearts,
may we believe in better and brighter times to come.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers a new start:

Today we are still three weeks away from the longest night and winter hasn't yet officially begun. Half of Scots and all of the English are under the restrictions of a pretty severe lockdown.

Many people fear for their health, their businesses or their jobs. And if they don't fear for themselves then they do for their families and friends. It is a dark time indeed.

I think it's fair to say no-one wants another year like 2020 and this winter will be hard. I think most of us are heartily fed up with not being able to see our loved ones, or even go to a shop without masking up and having to treat people as if they have the plague.

But today is also the first Sunday of Advent. That means the start of a new Church year. It is a time to look forward to the coming of the light, literally and spiritually. Despite the current darkness the future is full of hope. Over the last couple of weeks we have had wonderful news about not one, not two, but three vaccines against Covid-19. None has been approved or administered to the general population yet but all three look very, very promising indeed.

It finally feels as if we have turned a corner in a long, dark tunnel and, still some way ahead, we can see the light at the tunnel's end. We must keep on through the darkness a bit longer to get to that light but we can see it's there.

Maybe by Easter (hopefully, possibly, perhaps) we will be able to greet each other with more than an elbow bump. We may even be able to sing together. That really is a thought to lighten the darkness.