

Sunday 8th December 2024

Advent 2

'The Salvation of God'

Introduction

Beginning today, the second Sunday of Advent, we look this week to that time when God will have graciously given Godself to live among us. We look forward expectantly to receive with joy once more, God's most precious gift. Giving and receiving gifts at Christmas are reminders, symbols, of that gift, Jesus, whose very name in Hebrew means 'God saves' (Yeshua). So, in our Advent dawn of the new day, light begins to break the darkness, and we hear a voice. Out of the wilderness, across millennia, John the Baptist, gives us the information we need to find our way to Christ and salvation. Paradoxically, that way is by clearing a path for Him to come to us.

'The Salvation of God'

by

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Malachi 3:1-14; Song of Zechariah; Philippians 1:1-11; **Luke 3:1-16**

Introduction

During this week, beginning today the second Sunday of Advent, we look to that time when we celebrate God's coming to live among us as Prince of Peace. We wait expectantly, while preparing for the great feast of Christmas. We bring home special food. We share with others out of our great or small abundance. Food hampers are packed and delivered; children's toys are collected and put under public Christmas trees or into the sacks of many a charitable Father Christmas; and invitations to homely gatherings are given out.

In the Advent dawn of the new day, we remember once more that God's salvation will be grasped and shown by the lowly, as of old did Jewish shepherds of Judea; grasped and shown by those of high-status, as of old did Gentile rulers from the East. And we remember that it is a little child who led them, the little Christ child who leads us. Now we look at the final preparations God and God's people made for the new day.

Malachi 3:1-14

Preparations usually require communication, the greater the event, the greater the communication. It was certainly so for the final preparations for this great day that was coming: so many moveable parts!

In our first reading, we heard from the prophet, Malachi, whose name means 'my messenger' or 'my angel', same thing. When Malachi spoke, God's people had not long returned to their land from exile in Babylon. A new generation had grown up and adapted to Babylonian culture. Malachi called the people to return also to the one true God and the righteousness of the Law of the Covenant. Isaiah and other prophets also wrote on this theme and about that day when God would come to Judea.

The prophets of Israel kept the hope of God's salvation alive through all that the people suffered and celebrated. With constancy, they urged, encouraged, reminded, remonstrated, and comforted the people of Israel at each step in their history.

As did Malachi, the prophets also foretold the one who would prepare the people for God's coming. This one would appear in Judah, Roman Province of Judea, at the very dawn of the long-awaited day of salvation.

Luke 3:1-6

A few weeks ago, we heard that Samuel was the last of the judges to rule in Israel. Samuel anointed the first king, Saul, a step which ushered in a new epoch in the development of God's people. Similarly, John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, was the last of the great prophets and another step was taken. With the baptism by John, God anointed Jesus of Nazareth the spiritual king of a great people and the epoch of the Kingdom of God would come to earth. But let's not get beyond ourselves: our focus is on John, last of the great prophets. How do we know that he was a prophet? What were the indicators of such a one and, crucially, the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)?

Well, first, John lived in the wilderness as the early great prophet Elijah had done and worn "... a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins." (2 Kings 1:8). Second, Luke wrote that 'the word of God came to John'. We find this or similar wording throughout the writings of the great prophets. Thus, Luke placed John firmly in the line of Elijah, Isaiah, Malachi, and the other great prophets.

A KPI of a great prophet was that of seeing clearly when the Covenant relationship between God and the people was in danger of breaking down. A true prophet called for the people to return to their God, to remember their vows, and to keep God's law as their part of the Covenant relationship.

However, the prophets could also speak the word of God directly to kings and rulers. It took great courage to do so. John rebuked Herod Philip, the tetrarch, Roman-appointed governor, of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, for breaking God's law and thus the covenant, just as Elijah had rebuked Ahab, the King of Israel, who ruled in Samaria (1 Kings 21:17-29).

Another KPI of the great, true prophets was that their words were not empty, merely falling to the ground. No. The word of God spoken by such prophets was fulfilled just as was the word spoken by God at creation. The word spoken by the prophet was powerful. It was also understood that a prophecy would hold through time, becoming a promise. The promise would be fulfilled according to God's appointed time when all would be ready.

At the appointed time, the Word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. John was not only a prophet but the last because he was the fulfillment of a prophecy. 'As it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, his was the voice heard crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."' John gave his life to fulfil his prophetic vocation.

Philippians 1:1-11

The preparations for the coming of Jesus of Nazareth were necessary for the fruit Paul saw in the Gentile church at Philippi. The church was in Greek Macedonia and the first in Europe. It has been described as healthy, strong, and generous. The letter of Paul to these Gentile Christians certainly upholds that description.

Conclusion

This Second Sunday in Advent, following the terrorist attack of 6th December, on the Adass Israel Synagogue in Melbourne, let us thank God and the people of Israel. We thank God for steadfast loving kindness in faithfulness to the Old Covenant with Israel, which continues and includes Christians. We thank God for the New Covenant made through Jesus Christ, whose coming we shall commemorate with great joy. I invite you to join with me also in thanking the people of Israel for centuries of faithfulness to the covenant, keeping God's Law as a guide to right living, preserving the writings of the prophets and the wise, and for their prayers for the One who brings to humanity the blessing of the way of peace. No other nation on earth could have given the world the day of light that in Advent we see dawning.

Finally, let us allow the Holy Spirit within and between us to help us prepare as the time draws near, straightening the winding ways of our hearts and smoothing paths made rough by sin. May we desire and set out to keep our hearts watchful in holiness, that He who is coming may bring to perfection the good God has begun in us.