**Sunday 5th December 2021 Advent 2 Trinity**

**Malachi 3:1-4 & Luke 3:1-6**

**God’s Messenger**

Israel has always viewed itself as having a special relationship with God – they viewed themselves as God’s chosen people. A people who would be a light to other nations. But after a period of time the people began to feel that God was a bit of a let-down, and that whether one believed in God really didn’t matter.

They felt that the prophets, who had tried so hard to keep the nation faithful to God, had been shooting them a line and deceiving them.

Malachi is the last of the Prophetical books in the Old Testament. The name Malachi actually means, “My Messenger.” From the conditions reflected in the book it is usually dated around 460 to 430BC.

Disillusionment has set in. Times were hard and prosperity had not been realised. Within the people of Israel an increasingly casual attitude to worship and God’s standards developed. In some ways it was as if there had developed an attitude that God was absent and that God didn’t care. If God didn’t care, then why should God’s chosen people who viewed themselves as no longer being chosen care?

Indifference towards God is soon shown in callousness towards one another. Men were marrying non-Jewish women (which was forbidden on religious, not racial grounds.)

Older men were cruelly discarding their ageing wives and marrying younger, more attractive foreign women. Family life, as always, suffered.

Being in a society with out social welfare where status, well-being, income and a home were dependent for women and the children, on the husband, this meant those cast aside were destitute.

Into this social malaise the Prophet Malachi speaks. He says that God cares for the well-being of his people. God cares for how they feel about themselves and each other. That is why God requires faithfulness from his chosen people: faithfulness to God’s self and faithfulness in human relationships.

Malachi’s starting point is God’s love. But the people, struggling with economic hardship and persistent sniping from within the community, cannot see much evidence of God’s love.

Malachi stresses that Israel holds a special relationship with God, and the people were not ever to forget that.

Enough is enough says Malachi, the Lord is coming first to purify and then to judge. A Messenger will be sent on ahead to prepare the way.

So it is with our reading from Luke’s Gospel this morning. On this Sunday in Advent we always hear again of John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, who prepared the way – who introduced Jesus to the people of Israel. Now it is important to know that John saw himself as a Messenger – his main message was to introduce the main speaker, Jesus. John is quite upfront that he is not the ‘main event.’ He is simply the ‘forerunner.” He is a Messenger at a time when the chosen, favoured people of God are under the occupation of Rome and all of its strict rules.

All four Gospel in telling the story of Jesus begin with John the Baptiser – the introducer. You don’t get to Jesus until you have heard an introduction from John.

Yet when you listen to John’s introduction it sort of ranks alongside that of Malachi. John’s message was basically, “You bunch of snakes! Who told you to try to escape from hell fire? His axe is in his hand; he will cut you down to the root! He’s going to separate the good seed from the trash and then cast the trash into the fire! I’m not worthy to tie his shoelaces, he’s so great! You’d better get all washed up. Come on down into this water and repent!”

Most didn’t want to hear the message of John. As they quietly tried to exit from the auditorium John shouted after them, “Hey, I’m talking about you. Don’t think you can rely on all your wealth and political connections, or any sense of family birthright. They’re not going to protect or save you!”

Why would anyone want to stay after a hellfire introduction like that?

The question for us today is what we do with those who challenge us with messages that we do not wish to hear?

We have no record of how Malachi died, but we do know that his message wasn’t well received by those who had invested interest in the status quo.

Herod, at the behest of his wife had John the Baptist beheaded and his head brought in on a platter. Why was John killed? Simply because he challenged the life-style and ethics of those in power ie King Herod and his wife, who was the wife of Herod’s brother, Philip. It doesn’t pay to get offside with an angry woman – especially one with power and influence. Simon Bridges found this out just over a week ago when he let it be known that he was likely to make a run again for the leadership of the National Party.

Jesus challenged the vested interests of those in political power and those in religious power. He ended up crucified on a Cross.

History provides us with numerous examples of political assassinations. Henry VIII during his 36-year reign had approximately 36,000 people killed. Many of these were clergy or nobles. Some were just ordinary citizens who got on the wrong side of Henry. Two of his six wives he had beheaded. Henry VIII was subject to raging mood swings and paranoia but his theological base for all he did was, that to be against him was to be against God.

Political ruthlessness and protection of vested interest is not limited to Herod, Pilate, Jewish Religious leaders and Henry VIII.

Between them the Communist regimes in the world are estimated to have executed upwards of 200 million people. Hitler, in WWII, had over 6 million Jews killed but the number of people who died during World War II is estimated to be in excess of 60 million. Put on top of this countries like Syria, Libya, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Uganda, South Africa, Sudan, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Myanmar, the Philippines, Argentina, Chile- to name a few and we begin to realise the cost in economic terms and human life of those in power seeking to retain it to protect their vested interest.

What happened in Biblical times still occurs today. The question for us is what do we do with those whom we disagree with and how do we treat those who may challenge our stance? Who do you see as the God’s Messengers in our times and how are these people treated?

But the question for you and me is not how John preached or how he introduced Jesus or prepared the way for him. Rather the question for you and me today is who we listen to and whose leadership and advice we accept. How do we discern false prophets from prophets who speak a truthful word of God.

I think there are a number of questions we can ask:

1. Is what I am hearing and being called to do in accord with the Gospel message of nurturing grace and love?
2. Does it build goodwill and peace and harmony?
3. Who benefits?
4. Does this message focus and centre on Jesus Christ as Lord, making him and his Way, Truth and Life known or does it promote some other agenda?

To God be the glory. Amen