

The Service of the Lord's Day

Saint Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark
Leader: Rev Dr Barry Brown - Reader: Yvonne Spicer

Sunday 16th December 2018 - Advent 3

We Gather to Worship God

WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE WURUNDJERI PEOPLE

WE STAND AS THE BIBLE IS CARRIED IN TO WORSHIP

INTROIT *Prepare ye the way of the Lord...* (in three parts)

GREETING, WELCOME and CALL TO WORSHIP

WE SING *On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry...* TiS 270

1

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
come then and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings from the King of kings.

2

Then cleansed be every heart from sin;
make straight the way for God within;
prepare we in our hearts a home
where such a mighty guest may come.

3

For you are our salvation, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward;
without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

4

To heal the sick stretch out your hand,
and bid the fallen sinner stand;
shine forth, and let your light restore
earth's own true loveliness once more.

5

To him who left the throne of heaven
to free us all, let praise be given;
and praise be to the Father done,
and Holy Spirit, Three in One.

PRAYERS OF ADORATION and CONFESSION

WORD'S DECLARING GOD'S FORGIVING GRACE

We Listen to God's Word:

AN EARLY WORD, ADVENT CANDLES and SONG

Today is the Third Sunday in Advent. We light the third candle to remember **John the Baptist**, a relative of Jesus. John was called to **Prepare the way** for Jesus; and John baptized Jesus before Jesus began his work. John was brave in the way he spoke for God; as a result, he was killed and became a forerunner of the Christian martyrs who have died for Jesus Christ.

Prayer: God of promise and fulfillment, thank you for the people you used to prepare the way for Jesus. Thank you for those who spoke your word of hope and promise. Today we remember with thanksgiving John the Baptist, who dared to declare who Jesus was - to hostile people. Give us also the courage to declare the Good News of Jesus within our sometimes-hostile world. **Amen**

We Sing:

***'Christmas is coming'
the Church is glad to sing
and let the Advent candles
brightly burn in a ring.***

1. The first is for God's promise
to put the wrong things right,
and bring to earth's darkness
the hope of love and light.

Refrain

2. The second for the prophets
who said that Christ would come
with good news for many
and angry words for some.

Refrain

- 3 The third is for the Baptist
who cried, 'Prepare the way.
be ready for Jesus,
both this and every day.'

Refrain

THE SERVICE OF THE WORD:

THE SCRIPTURE READINGS:

The Book of the prophet, Malachi. Chapter 3, Verses 1 to 4

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.

THE GOSPEL according to Saint Luke. Chapter 3, Verses 7 to 20

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

THE CHOIR SINGS – *Jesus is Beside Us*

PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD

'Checkpoint JB'

[The following is a manuscript version of the sermon by Rev Dr Barry Brown, 16th December 2018]

Introduction

Earlier this year I provided Ancestry with a DNA sample and soon after received a report on where my forebears had come from over recent centuries. I was also provided with more than 450 'matches' ranging from first to fifth cousins. This was amazing given that these matches are only with those who have also done the Ancestry DNA test. Of my 20 first cousins, only three had taken the test – 15%. If I use this as a guide, it suggests I have at least 3,000 cousins. I have contacted several cousins I did not know of previously, and I may continue to do this further as time permits.

Sometimes when I am considering my family history, and thinking about the lives of my forebears whom I have researched and discovered quite a lot, I imagine meeting them. This usually brings me to a rather awkward question: How well would I get on with them, especially those whose life-experience is so very different to my own, and who are separated by several generations? I suspect there would be quite a few I would not like very much. I also suspect there would be many who would not like me either, and would see the world quite differently to the way I see it – including my religious views. I already know relatives that I consider rather 'prickly, abrasive, confronting and too direct.' So I suspect there are more like that.

Well, today we meet one of Jesus relatives – John the Baptist. He was a bit 'prickly, abrasive, confronting and very direct' in what he said. We also encounter another lingering figure, the eighth century BCE prophet, Elijah. Some have made the connection between John and Elijah as the one whose role was to prepare the way for the Lord's Messiah.

The Book of Malachi (chapter 3:1 – 4, also noting chapter 4:5 – 6)

Last week I mentioned that the Book of Malachi comes from the Persian period that ended the Babylonian Exile – and the beginning of the Return. We do not know who wrote this book; but it is worth noting that the name Malachi means 'My Messenger,' which, because this is the main topic of the book, probably explains the book's title.

Malachi is the very last book of our Old Testament. Its closing verses speak about the prophet Elijah being sent before the Day of The Lord (4:5 & 6).

Elijah was from the 8th century BCE, but had not been forgotten. His amazing ministry was remembered by Malachi three and a half centuries later – and again, by Jews at the time of Jesus.

Luke's Introduction to John the Baptist

In the New Testament John the Baptist is often associated with Elijah, the Messenger who announces the coming of the Day of the Lord. He is identified as the forerunner of the Messiah.

Luke, interestingly, spends considerable space introducing the person of John the Baptist. First the announcement of John's birth comes before that of Jesus; and the birth of John is told before that of Jesus. This, however, does not only mean that John was a bit older than Jesus; but that in the purposes of God, John is the one who prepares the way for the coming of Jesus. This has profound meaning in Luke, and this is his way of declaring from the start that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

Remember the angel who spoke to Zechariah about the birth of the child, John, to him and Elizabeth – Luke 1:13 - 16
16He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (An allusion to the closing words of the Book of Malachi).

Luke 3:7 – 20

Today's Gospel Reading, Luke 3:7 – 20, tells of the ministry of John the Baptist, which precedes the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in the following chapter.

John, in his abrasive, very direct way, confronts the religious leaders about their hypocrisy and their reliance upon their Jewishness – being descendants of Abraham. That will not do. Lives that bear the living fruit of religious faith is what counts – and the axe lies close to the base of the tree. So watch out !

The text then deals with the same question being asked by three sets of voices: “What should we do?” This is an important question during Advent - the season of preparation! “What should we do?”

First, the crowds take notice. They ask, “What then should we do”? And John starts talking about the difference between the haves and the have nots. About extra clothes in the closet; and food going to waste – when others are lacking such things. He talks directly about equality and social justice. These are important things – not just in John's world, but also in ours.

Next the tax collectors asked, “Teacher, what should we do?” And he gave them a dressing down about their tendency toward manipulating the ‘financial services industry’ of their day for their own advantage. Perhaps this past year we have heard an echo of that voice in that of Justice Kenneth Hayne, the Royal Commissioner looking into our financial service industry, as he too gave a dressing down to some of the institutional executives. But we can be sure that John’s words were meant also to be heard by the populace as well. And so too, we as citizens of this land, need examine our behaviours and practices.

Then the soldiers, public servants, those with power to coheres and control, asked “And we, what should we do?” Do not extort, threaten, make false accusations – and be satisfied with just wages. Don’t think you are above the rest and have rights and privileges to exercise over others.

Well, John’s responses are applicable whether or not we are specifically mentioned in this threefold enquiry. But there was one person, in particular, who began to wriggle on his seat – his throne. Herod, the puppet king. Our passage tells us, that for several reasons, Herod felt threatened by John and had him imprisoned. Later, Luke will tell of John’s execution on the orders of King Herod. The message of John was just too much for those who stand to lose what they have, or what they think they have!

I watched with interest two British royal weddings this past year. The marriage in May of Prince Harry & Meghan Markle was of historic interest. Boundaries were crossed like never before. And one was memorable – the sermon being preached by an African-American Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA - Bishop Michael Curry. There was some wriggling in the pews that day!

A week or so later Leigh Sales interviewed Bishop Curry for the ABCTV’s 7.30 Report. You may have seen it; or you may have seen and heard the brief ‘grab’ from this interview in advertisements for the ABCTV 7.30 program. In case you have not, listen to some extracts from the interview which I downloaded from the internet. The bishop was talking about the real meaning of love and its challenge in our lives. Love was the topic of his sermon at the royal wedding:
I really believe that the essence of our struggle can be found in any form of unbridled selfishness. We have got to find a way to live together and for each other. That is why I believe that the way of love is the way that does that. I mean, this isn't really a sentimental thing that I am talking about. This is really an intentional way of living, of unselfish living and that will have consequences and impact on a whole host of issues, whether it is wars between nations, whether it is tribal conflicts, whether it is conflicts within countries, whether it is the extent of poverty in our global community...

That is actually what we are really talking about, this kind of selfishness where I think, where I am the centre of the universe, and everybody else, including God, is on the periphery. That doesn't work. We have to live together and if we live together, we actually can make a better world. The issues at the root of the cause of the problem is unbridled selfishness, which is what religious traditions mean by the word Sin

Such prophetic voices intrude into our preparation for Christmas. They say to us: Do not rush into Christmas. Linger in Advent, the season of preparation. For here we might address the very things that prevent us from really knowing the depth of those well-known words, Joy to the world. The Lord is come.

Following this Question and Answer encounter, Luke adds:

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

John is soon to move off-stage, and Jesus will be centre-stage. In Luke's perspective of Salvation History a new paradigm comes into being. Remember that Luke has given us two volumes – The Gospel according to Luke and The Acts of the Apostles. In these Luke tells us that Jesus is called by God's Spirit, and equipped by the Spirit. He also tells us that those who are called to follow Jesus (that's us), do so, not in our strength, but in the strength of the Holy Spirit who is Jesus' enabling gift to us.

John is not indicating that we are about to have an intense religious experience (although that is not to be discounted); rather he is telling us that in order to be able to follow through on his own preaching, and be enabled to live and serve Jesus, we are to be equipped, blessed by the same Spirit of God. And as the first disciples discovered that they were surprisingly able love and serve Jesus, sometimes at great cost, so too are we – sometimes also at cost. For Jesus too is demanding as well as gracious.

Close

In the midst of the frenzy of preparing for Christmas, these dreaded weeks of getting ready, take time to listen to the voices that challenge us, not just to those we hope might provide us with comfort and joy.

I mentioned earlier that John the Baptist has long been associated with Elijah, the great prophet of the eighth century BCE. At the very end of the Book of Malachi (the OT book from which we read this morning) we have a paragraph that begins with

these words: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes...” (Malachi 4:5). In the Christian Bible, this paragraph concludes the Old Testament. The very next words in our Bible are from Matthew 1:1 “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham...” For those who organized the Christian Bible, which included a re-organizing of the sequence of the books of the Hebrew Bible, this was intentional. Not only did the Book of Malachi, some four and a half centuries before Jesus, keep alive the hope of Elijah’s return; we know also from all four Gospels that this hope was still alive during the time of Jesus. Both John and Jesus were at times thought to have been Elijah returned. Luke wants us to see this, and to understand that John the Baptist is the ‘Elijah’ who prepares the way for Jesus.

Our faith-cousins, those who practice Judaism, still have their hope of Elijah as the predecessor of the Messiah. When they celebrate Passover, the central event is the Seder meal in the family home. There are several ceremonial pourings of wine. The fifth cup is left untouched, in honour of Elijah. A place is kept for him! And during the reading of parts of the Hebrew Bible, the door to the room is kept ajar – symbolizing the hope of Elijah’s return to prepare for the Messiah. And Elijah, so Malachi wrote, will also “turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of the parents to their parents” (Malachi 4:6).

We Respond to God’s Word:

WE SING *O day of God, draw near...*

TiS 616

1

O day of God, draw near
in beauty and in power,
come with your timeless judgment now
to match our present hour.

2

Bring to our troubled minds,
uncertain and afraid,
the quiet of a steadfast faith,
calm of a call obeyed.

3

Bring justice to our land
that all may dwell secure,

and firmly build for days to come
foundations that endure.

4

Bring to our world of strife
your sovereign word of peace,
that war may haunt the earth no more
and desolation cease.

5

O day of God, draw near
as at creation's birth;
let there be light again, and set
your justice in the earth.

THE OFFERING, PRAYER and our 'JOURNEY SONG'

Prayer:

Loving God - we continually seek your strength and comfort. You often free us from our unfounded fears, and provide us with wonderful examples of your love. In response, we offer these gifts, along with ourselves. We pray that each will help provide something, that touches people with your extraordinary love. This we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen

SING – TIS 342 (verse 4)

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small:
love so amazing, so divine
demands my soul, my life, my all.

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE and THE LORD'S PRAYER - English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC)

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come, your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
Now and for ever.

THE CHILDREN 'SHOW & TELL'

The Sending Forth of The People Of God

A READING FROM THE LETTERS – Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians. Chapter 4, Verses 4 to 7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

WORDS OF MISSION, BLESSING AND DISMISSAL

WE SING *Rejoice, the Lord is King...*

TiS 216

1

Rejoice, the Lord is King;
your Lord and King adore;
let all give thanks, and sing,
and triumph evermore;
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice.

Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

2

Jesus the Saviour reigns,
the God of truth and love;
when he had purged our stains,
he took his seat above:

Lift up your heart, lift up your voice.

Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

3

His kingdom cannot fail,
he rules o'er earth and heaven;
the keys of death and hell
are to our Jesus given:

Lift up your heart, lift up your voice.

Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

4

He sits at God's right hand,
till all his foes submit,
and bow to his command,
and fall beneath his feet:

Lift up your heart, lift up your voice.

Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

5

Rejoice in glorious hope;
Jesus the judge shall come,
and take his servants up
to their eternal home:

*We soon shall hear the archangel's voice;
the trump of God shall sound, Rejoice!*

