



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 5, 2021
The Second Sunday of Advent

Solemn Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6
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Preparing the Way

On Tuesday, God willing, the Saint Thomas Choir of Men and Boys will perform Handel's Messiah for the first time in two years. The return of this annual tradition is eagerly anticipated and, for a brief moment, together with many other musical venues in New York, we might easily forget that we are still dealing with a pandemic.

It is 279 years since the first performance of Messiah took place in Dublin. I believe it took place in Dublin because many people in England, and particularly the bishops, were scandalized that Handel had decided to turn from composing secular opera to setting sacred texts to music, and this was a neat way of avoiding discontent. For something that has become a beloved part of the repertoire of every great choir and choral, it is hard to believe that it was a whole year before the work was performed in London. Our Old Testament Lesson today and our Gospel reading contain words from the opening sections of Handel's oratorio, albeit Luke is quoting the prophet Isaiah.

Handel's Messiah is, of course, all about our Lord Jesus Christ and yet, in the 81 bible verses and, roughly, quarter of a million notes they are set to, we do not hear the Lord directly speaking to us; and the only verse from the Gospels that consists of the words of Jesus is changed into the third person. Instead of "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," the soloist sings "Come unto *Him*, all ye that labor, that are heavy laden, and *He* shall give you rest." There is something powerful about not re-enacting the story, but rather, reflecting on it. In some respects, it is like comparing the three synoptic gospels with the Fourth Gospel. John's Gospel is not a chronological and geographical account of the life of Jesus, but the infant church reflecting on that life theologically, and prayerfully entering into the mystery.

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament in the Christian Bible. If your bible does not contain the Apocrypha, then the very next book is the Gospel of Matthew. Although written many years before the birth of Christ, Malachi has often been interpreted through the lens of the incarnation. "*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.*" This reference to the Temple is important for our understanding of the context of the Book of Malachi, for it was written around the time of the restoration after the Babylonian Exile, and the re-building of the Temple. The prophet is concerned with the priesthood of that Temple that has become lax in its religious observance and in its moral authority. Cleansing and purification were needed and the prophet uses the strong image of a smelting works in which precious metal is refined by using fire: "*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.” The priesthood was created so that the people had the chance to come close to God, but that priesthood needed to be refined. Malachi knew that the priests needed to be faithful but they also needed to be worthy to serve in God’s house, in his Temple, so that their offerings would be pure and holy. Perhaps this is why Handel’s librettist added by way of commentary these words to associate with the quotations from Malachi: “*The prophecy of the coming of Messiah and the question...of what this may portend for the World.*” Indeed, the book of the prophet Malachi ends with a remarkable prophecy: “*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.*” (Malachi 4:5)

For us, as Christians, that prophecy about a messenger preparing the way of the Lord is fulfilled in none other than John the Baptist. Not literally the same Elijah who had been taken up into heaven in a whirlwind and chariot of fire as recounted in the Second Book of Kings (see 2 Kings 2:9-11) but one who was the *fulfilment* of that prophecy – one with the *spirit* of Elijah who would precede the arrival of the Messiah.

John the Baptist’s life and ministry is rooted in this prophecy. Even the circumstances of his conception resonate with the Book of Malachi. The Angel Gabriel did not appear to Elizabeth in her home, like he appeared to Mary in Nazareth, neither did he appear in a dream as the Angel did in the case of Joseph; no, Gabriel appeared to his father, Zechariah, the priest, in *the Temple*, and not just in the Temple courts, but in the midst of the main building just yards from the Holy of Holies. It was Zechariah’s turn to offer incense to the Lord on the Altar of Incense within the Temple which, again, echoes the prophecy of Malachi: “*From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.*” (Malachi 1:11) As Zechariah offered the incense, Gabriel told him that his son would be that messenger prophesied of old who would bring people back to the Lord and restore the broken relationships, thus fulfilling the old prophecy of Malachi: Gabriel said, “*With 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.*” (Luke 1:17)

And in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says of his cousin, “*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!*” (Matthew 11:12-15)

We are all familiar with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, in the desert, and yet, through the priestly ministrations of his father and the intervention of the Angel Gabriel, it had actually begun in God’s Temple. How beautiful that the choir sang the song of Zechariah, the Benedictus which, Luke tells us, Zechariah sang at the birth of his son. “*And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest, for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways.*”

Luke places similar words of the prophet Isaiah in the mouth of John the Baptist: “*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*”

And lest we think that this is all hyperbole, Luke (as he does with the Annunciation Narrative) roots the prophecies and the ministry of John the Baptist firmly in the real world, in time and in space: “*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.*” Not only in time and space, but in a world dominated by human power – The Roman Emperor himself, the Roman Governor, the three Roman Tetrarchs – Herod (who also significantly enlarged and beautified the restored Temple), Philip, and Lysanias, and then Luke names not one but two High priests – Annas and Caiaphas. Imagine the first hearers of the opening lines of Luke’s Gospel listening to that list of greatness into which he then inserts John the Baptist, but in utter contrast: “*The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*”

That wilderness is where God was to be found, not in grand palaces or imperial might. Into that same wilderness came Jesus, the Messiah, to the Jordan where John welcomed him as the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. In sharp contrast to the noise of corrupt human power, God revealed himself in the still small voice of the one who prepared the way for him.

As we gather here today, Fifth Avenue and the Rockefeller Center is bustling with expectation, but expectation for something quite different to what we are proclaiming today. As we continue our Advent journey, and stop for a brief moment away from the commercialism and missed opportunities of Fifth Avenue, we enter more deeply into the mystery of salvation. Unlike those for whom Christmas is the end of the holiday season, for us Christians it is actually the beginning, for as Malachi prophesied, *"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?"*