

## *Walking and working in the ways of peace*

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*Malachi 3: 1-14; Song of Zechariah; Philippians 1:1-11; Luke 3: 1-6*

During Advent this year, we're sharing together the four traditional themes of hope, peace, joy and love. Today, the second Sunday in Advent, our theme is peace.

The Advent Bible readings also focus on some of the important characters in the Advent story. For today's Psalm, we heard Zechariah's words of praise and prophecy over his newborn son, John.

In the Gospel, we heard John's proclamation of repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. He called on the people to prepare the way of the Lord and make straight the paths of God. John preached hope, that all would see the salvation of God." (Luke 3.1-6)

I expect that today's reading from Malachi was chosen for the lectionary because of similarities with the story of John. This is the only time in the three-year lectionary cycle that Malachi is the main Old Testament reading for Sunday. So it's an opportunity to have a look at it together.

If you want to remember just one date from Old Testament history, it's this — 587 BCE, when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and many of its people were taken in exile. Almost 50 years later, the Babylonian empire collapsed at the hands of the Persians. The exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem, to rebuild the Temple and re-establish its worship and ritual.

The book of Malachi was written in Judah twenty or thirty years after the return from exile. Mal'achi simply means 'my messenger'. We don't know if it's the name of a person. The book is made up of a series of disputations or arguments that tackle problems within the Judean community. [Mal. 1:2-5; 1:6-2:9; 2:10-16; 2:17-3:5; 3:6-12; 3:13-22 plus two brief additions at the end, 3:22-24 As a source on Malachi, I have used Donald E Gowan's *Theology of the prophetic books: the death and resurrection of Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998.]

It was a time of peace in Judea. It could have been an opportunity for excellence in the service and worship of God; but it wasn't so.

There was a Persian-appointed governor, but affairs were controlled by the Levitical priesthood. And the priests in charge were seriously neglecting their duties. Since they were the leaders, supposed to be setting an example for the spiritual character of the community, this was a threat to wellbeing of the whole nation.

The text gives a picture of priests and people that are discouraged and disillusioned. They question whether God does anything for his people.

"How have you loved us?" they ask God (1:2).

"Where is the God of justice?" "It is vain to serve God" they say. "What do we profit by keeping his command?" (3:14).

The problem Malachi confronted was low morale, skepticism and unbelief. The special way of life of God's people was neglected or forgotten. The priesthood was going through the motions, accepting any kind of sacrifice, for example, — lame, blind, and sick animals (1:7-14), when God's service demanded the very best.

The priests were also neglecting their place as teachers — people who tell the people about God's purposes for them (2:6-9).

Marriage was being violated in a way that offended Malachi and payment of tithes was being neglected, which Malachi says was robbing God (3:8-12). As well there's the usual list of sins and sinners — sorcerers, adulterers, liars, and those who oppress hired workers, widows, orphans and aliens (Mal. 3:5) — problems that occur in every generation, including ours.

By this time in their history the people of Judea had the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, in a similar form to what we have today. Malachi used these texts, preserved and collected during the long years of exile, to say that God's ways were being neglected.

Malachi points to a Day of the Lord as a day of judgment, when the righteousness of some and the wickedness of others will be revealed (3:2-5, 17-18; 4:1-3). A messenger was to prepare the way for the Lord (3:1). Perhaps this was fulfilled in John the baptizer.

Then we are told that the Lord (adonay) will suddenly come to his temple and that "messenger of the covenant" is coming. We can't be certain what Malachi meant by this. For us, perhaps, it speaks of Jesus himself. In Malachi, he is to purify the Levites, so that they can make acceptable offerings, just as we are made pure for God's service.

Malachi emphasises responsibility. He calls for leaders and people to repent of spiritual stagnation, walk away from carelessness and skepticism, and to be faithful to what they already know and believe.

God had set the people free and returned them from exile (3:6). They had peace, but they used it for a false peacefulness of complacency, neglect and spiritual laziness.

Following the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s, in 1968 the Catholic Bishops of Latin America met in Medellín in Columbia to consider how the church in Latin America could change in the light of the Council. One of their achievements was an important Document on Peace. [Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, "The Church in the Present-Day Transformation on Latin America in the Light of the Council" (26 Aug - 6 Sep 1968) — Document on Peace, section 14.] The Medellín bishops said that three things are important to a Christian concept of peace.

The first is that peace is, above all, a work of justice. For there to be peace, it must be possible for people to be fulfilled as human beings, their dignity respected, their legitimate aspirations satisfied, their access to truth recognized, and their personal freedom secure.

Peace comes as we commit ourselves to these goals and work for justice. Peace is not simply the absence of violence.

If peace is a work of justice, it is also, secondly, a permanent task. Every moment of our lives together is different from the previous moment and the next. The creation of peace requires continuous conversion and change. We depend on the grace and power of God for this. But we ourselves must act as well.

Peace is not passive. Peace is not mere conformity and acceptance of things as they are. It comes from effort, from adapting to new circumstances, from accepting new demands and challenges. Authentic peace implies struggle and creativity.

Peace is not found, it is built. A Christian is a builder of peace.

Thirdly, and importantly, peace is the fruit of love. Peace is found in true fellowship — the goodwill to all people spoken of by the angels at Bethlehem. It comes in the oneness given by Christ, the Prince of Peace, who reconciles all things to the Father, giving peace that the world cannot give.

Peace is intimately related to righteousness — life as God wants it to be, made possible through repentance, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the empowering communion of the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah (32.17) says that “The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever”,

Psalm 85 (10) says that “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other”

...and the letter of James (3:18) says that “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

After their return from exile, the people of Judah had new start, but it was in danger of amounting to nothing. The people and their leaders had forgotten that the peace they enjoyed was an opportunity for action.

We enjoy peace with God, through Jesus Christ. We are challenged, of course, to work for peace and justice through environmental, social and economic action. There are many opportunities to do this, as you know well.

We are challenged to work for peace in the body of Christ, among ourselves and in the wider church. I thank God for the friendship and peaceableness we share at St. Philip's. But let's take care to rid ourselves of any hardness or lack of forgiveness among ourselves. Let's do that now — if possible in this very service.

We also work for peace by reconciling others to God, in Jesus Christ. “How beautiful upon the mountains,” Isaiah says, “are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation” (Isaiah 52.7, cf. Romans 10.15).

The Advent challenge is to announce to all, “look he comes!” (Song of Solomon 2:8) to bring to our friends and loved ones — because they are our friends and the people we love — the great tidings of good news in Jesus Christ.

Malachi called for action, reminding the nation who God really is, and what God wanted for the people he had chosen, and for the world.

Malachi invites us to challenge ourselves and change ourselves, by God's grace, to live as we have been taught, walking and working in the ways of peace.