

At our Advent study on Thursday evening I was really struck by a phrase, and a conversation that followed that phrase. The phrase that stood out was *we ought to be willing to hear God's words*. Others in the group were struck by an early phrase in the same passage from Aquinas – ‘*the Word of God, not like the word that is uttered externally (for this is transitory) but as the word conceived inwardly*<sup>1</sup>’ What does it mean to not only hear or read the word of God, but to actually be willing to hear what it is saying, to actually internalise the words, rather than them just passing through our mind or eyes.

There are so many words in our faith, in fact some refer to Christians and Jews as the *people of the book*. Our own traditions call us to ‘read, mark and inwardly digest’ God’s word; both the text and Jesus. But one of the things that I felt challenged by on Thursday was Am I actually willing to hear what is being said, to hear things differently, to hear things which are new. Our conversation went further than this to explore whether we allow what we hear and read to inwardly transform us.

This idea of being changed by words seemed particularly poignant as we approach the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent and consider how we are influenced by the prophets; and the role of the prophets as we come to watch and wait for the coming of Christ. Malachi, which we heard earlier, introduces a figure whom God calls “my messenger.” There is a pun in this because Malachi’s name in Hebrew literally means “my messenger.” Malachi is not the only messenger of the Lord; however, he is an excellent example of what a messenger of God is supposed to do. God’s messenger will clear obstacles to the Lord’s coming. Malachi warns that God’s appearance will take them by surprise (*see “suddenly” in Malachi 3:1*). The prophet may hint at the possibility of the people being caught unprepared for the coming of the Lord. Yet no amount of preparation will enable one to anticipate adequately the impact of God’s appearance and the depth of what will follow. <sup>2</sup>

Malachi anticipates that there will be varied responses to the coming of the Lord, but somehow there is an intersection in this prophecy between despair and hope, - maybe this is the intersection we encounter in Advent as well. In essence however, the messenger - the prophet - prepares others to be willing to hear, and open to see what is possible as we wait for the coming Lord.

There is so much language within these passages which may sit uncomfortably with us, or even be hard for us to relate to. The term Lord is one that is difficult for many, as is the idea of not being prepared, or even not being in Control. The prophet in many ways challenges these barriers - can we be open to hear that God is sending someone to transform the world, and us, and can we open to how this might change us - not just historically but in the future too.

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<sup>1</sup> *Advent and Christmas Wisdom from Thomas Aquinas by Andrew Carl Wisdom, OP. Redemptorist Publications 2009*

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3911](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3911)

Which leads us to a well-read passage from Luke 3 in which we meet John the Baptist, not for the first time, as Luke records his birth and the miracle with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Such a contrast from last week's Gospel reading when we were at the end of Jesus' ministry, preparing for his death. Today we are at the other end, as we meet John who lays the paving stones ready for Jesus' arrival.

The language which is used in this passage is eventually beautiful and poetic, but it begins with a chronological history report, positioning the time of John and Jesus, so that others may not dispute their placement or authority.

Politically, Luke indicates, circumstances have changed; Judea is now ruled by a Roman governor, and the Jewish leaders operate under the Roman emperor Tiberius.<sup>3</sup> At the end of this list of leaders comes "John son of Zechariah."

The way Luke writes his Gospel, we jump from the phrase at the end of chapter 2, where *Jesus grows in stature and grace*, straight to the word of God coming to John in the wilderness in such a way that it seems that the prophecy we have just heard at his birth is immediately fulfilled, rather than 30 years having elapsed! As readers we can quickly hear and see the link between John's birth and his life as a prophet – but so often this is not the case. The experience of prophecy, and the reality of it being fulfilled, so often are distant and therefore difficult to connect, hard to hear and internalise.

John is such an interesting character, and despite having two full Sundays in Advent when he features, we often don't spend much time reflecting on him. What I was reminded of this week in many commentaries was of course John the Baptist does not simply appear one day in the desert, rather Luke suggests that his growth and spiritual strength develop there. This is a hopeful and necessary message for us today. It doesn't take much effort to imagine our world as a desert. Scarcity, isolation, hunger, and violence seem to rule the day. The pain and injustice around us can make us wonder whether God is at work in this wilderness. But Luke suggests that the wilderness is precisely where God provides what we need, so that we can now be the ones "crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"

John's message of preparation was one which focused on repentance. Baptism and repentance are about change and transformation, and for John this change had to occur to prepare the way for Jesus' message. John really understood, in a way which we often give lip service to, but find much more difficult to understand in reality and put into action! Preparing for God's arrival means rethinking – or as I found on Thursday considering if we are willing to hear – or even open to inner change.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3894](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3894)

John calls us to let God reshape the landscape of our own minds and hearts – and in turn those of the world. God’s ways are not our ways.

But what is it that we need to be willing to hear; what might we need to internalise; what reshaping is God calling us too?

Yesterday I turned 50. At one level it is another day, another number– at another level it felt like a poignant moment. I don’t feel fifty, though I am not sure what it should feel like. It feels like most days I am still playing at being an adult, and something about being 50 seemed to make me think that I must be a grown up now! Thankfully at Tea and Chat on Friday when I expressed this concern, I was reassured that it is fine to not feel grown up and I was not alone. But it was odd to remember things that have happened in the last 50 years.

This date, amidst the readings for this week, made me wonder about the wilderness, about willingness, about the shape of change that forms who we are and continues to mould us.

John was open to being led into the wilderness and there he heard the voice of God which allowed him to point others and prepare others for Jesus who was to come.

What is God calling us to hear? This is so often the question that is asked in a sermon. But maybe the question is rather, Am I willing to hear what God has already said? And if we have heard, are we as Malachi invites prepared to clear the decks and to do it!

So often we see these questions, particularly at Advent, as more global and political questions about peace and justice – and these are good questions to ask. But what if we also ask these questions about the way we live day to day – the blocks or challenges we are not willing to face or maybe let go of?

The prophets of old called out from the wilderness – make a new path – prepare for what is to come. But response to the prophets requires us to walk on that path. For each of us, the way we answer these challenges might be different, and it reminded me of one of my favourite Leunig prayers – and one which I think invites us to be listening for the path that John and Jesus invite us to tread – or as we learnt on Thursday to be open to allowing God’s word to inhabit us.

*Dear God,*

*We pray for another way of being:*

*another way of knowing.*

*Across the difficult terrain of our existence*

*we have attempted to build a highway*

*and in so doing have lost our footpath.*

*God lead us to our footpath:*

*Lead us there where in simplicity*

*we may move at the speed of natural creatures*

*and feel the earth's love beneath our feet.*

*Lead us there where step-by-step we may feel*

*the movement of creation in our hearts.*

*And lead us there where side-by-side*

*we may feel the embrace of the common soul.*

*Nothing can be loved at speed.*

*God lead us to the slow path; to the joyous insights*

*of the pilgrim; another way of knowing: another way of being. Amen<sup>4</sup>.*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.leunig.com.au/works/prayers>