

Sermon for Riddells Creek and Mount Macedon

6th of December 2009

Today, as the liturgy has already made abundantly clear, is the second Sunday of Advent. Today we take our next step on the journey that leads us to Bethlehem and the birth of Christ. But as we are reminded again and again over these four weeks of Advent, this season does not just prepare us to celebrate the coming of Jesus in the past. It prepares us for the coming of Jesus in the future. This is another of Christianity's "both-and" moments. Advent helps us *both* remember the past *and* welcome the future; *both* celebrate the first coming of Christ *and* await the second.

Christianity is a profoundly "both-and" religion, rather than an "either-or" one. Our God is *both* One *and* Three; Jesus is *both* human *and* divine; despite attempts to prioritise one element over the other, Christian faith is a matter of *both* belief *and* action. And this is why this season of preparation is a time *both* of great joy *and* of absolute terror.

We are preparing for the coming of God. At this point I'm going to hand over to the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who puts this better than I could ever do. He writes:

"It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God ... We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for every one who has a conscience."¹

Today's readings remind us of that need to tremble at the approach of the Lord. The reading from the prophet Malachi warns people that the Lord is on his way. Malachi was prophesying at what my Old Testament professor Howard Wallace describes as "a time of restless waiting in the history of the people of Judah". The Exile was over, the second temple had been built, worship had been restored, but all was not yet well. The priests weren't worshipping faithfully, and Malachi warned that the Lord was going to come and restore righteousness. This is a promise of grace; God's coming to the people will set all things right. But as Malachi asks: "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". The coming of the Lord will involve judgment, and judgment is painful.

John the Baptist, like Malachi a messenger who prepared the people for the coming of the Lord, had a similar message, one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is not the gentle message of peace and goodwill that we're used to hearing at this time of year. In next week's reading, John will address those coming to be baptised as a "brood of vipers." Both John and Malachi are examples of the truth of which Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, that in previous ages the coming of God was frightening.

Yet, as I said earlier, Christianity is "both-and". The coming of God is both terrifying and joyous. Malachi warns the priests that they're going to be cleansed and refined, but reassures them that the end result will be them presenting offerings to the Lord in righteousness. John the Baptist's message is one of repentance, *metanoia*, which means change, turning around. This change will be difficult and frightening, but ultimately it will mean that valleys shall be filled, mountains and hills shall be made low, the crooked made straight, the rough ways made smooth. As John's father Zechariah prophesied: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." God's coming is both like a refiner's fire, and an example of tender mercy.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) pp. 185-186.

God comes to refine and clean us, and at this time of year, as we prepare for the coming of Christ, we are reminded of everything in us that we need to have refined and cleaned. The readings today talk about worship, about the way in which we interact with and respond to God. Malachi is addressing the descendants of Levi, the priests, and telling them that they will again be able to make acceptable offerings to God. Part of what Zechariah, himself a priest, celebrates in his prophecy is that with the coming of the Lord God's people will be able to serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness. As Christians we're in the same position that the descendants of Levi and Zechariah were; we're called to make our own acceptable offerings in holiness and righteousness. This time of year gives us every opportunity to worship God rightly. But it also gives us every encouragement not to.

You know my very mixed feelings about Advent and Christmas. In my very first Advent sermon here I confessed that this time of year makes me edgy, and I was given my very appropriate black, "Bah, humbug" Santa hat – it must be almost time for me to bring that out again. The celebration of Christmas in countries like Australia has become a time for excessive consumption, and that's a reason for repentance. But what's the alternative? How can we worship God rightly, and truly prepare for Christ coming again? Today's readings give us Paul's prayer for the Philippians: "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." Our love is to overflow, but it is not to be uncritical. Paul wants the Philippians' love to be well-informed. This, I think, is how Christians are invited to celebrate Christmas. With love, of course, because God is love, and Christmas celebrates the coming of God, but with knowledge and full insight, not getting sucked into all the craziness, able to resist the pressures that this time of year brings. That's not easy, but it's better than the alternative that we see all around us, of people eating too much, drinking too much, spending too much, and getting stressed and unhappy, all in the name of celebrating Christ's birth.

I want to end this sermon as I began, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who reminded us of the shiver of fear that we should feel at God's approach. Bonhoeffer argues that it is this fear that enables us to feel joy: "Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love."²

In these four weeks of Advent, let's take the time to recognise God's incomparable kindness in coming to us to judge us. With God's justice comes mercy, with repentance comes forgiveness, and the fire that refines us is also the dawn that brings light to those who sit in darkness. As I said, our faith is one of both-and, and thanks be to God for that. Amen.

² Ibid.