

## Advent 2 – 6 December 2009

Malachi 3:1-14

Song of Zechariah

Philippians 1:1-11

Luke 3:1-6

In these readings, there is an interesting juxtaposition of two aspects of God's coming among us. In the gospel reading we are given a quote from Isaiah in which we are told that *all flesh shall see the salvation of God* (Lk.3:6) and in the first reading from Malachi we are given a rather fierce warning, *but who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?* (Mal 3:2).

What are we to think about these two texts? I think sometimes the idea of the birth of the baby Jesus gets in the way of fully appreciating what we are actually preparing for in this Advent season. It is not just for the birth of a nice, cuddly baby, but for the putting on of skin by God, who came among us and lived as a man. It's almost as if we are trying to pretend that a lion cub is only a cute pussy cat, whereas it is really one of the "big cats".

So I'd like to have a closer look at Malachi and the parallel idea in the Gospel about the coming of Christ and how we are to prepare for this.

Last week, Mother Dorothy spoke about "waiting and longing" in her sermon. But what about this waiting? Is it just to be a sitting around, or is it a purposeful waiting, an expectant waiting? Some of us who are preparing for the family celebrations side of Christmas, are very busy in our period of waiting. I know I have started putting in orders for food, getting the bedroom set up for family visitors, and there will be a more than usually thorough run around with the vacuum cleaner. We know how to prepare for people coming! But how do we prepare for the celebration of the coming of God amongst us in history and in the many ways of each moment of our lives.

Luke is very careful to make sure we understand that this coming of Jesus was a real event, not just a story or myth. He sets the historical scene by using not just one, but three historical markers. So he writes that John the Baptist came at a certain time which can be dated by the ruler of the Roman Empire at the time, the local rulers in Palestine, and the ruling High Priest in the Temple. No room for doubt there.

And that coming of Jesus needed some preparation. It needed someone to come along first and get things ready. The reference to the highway being prepared and valleys filled and so on, is a reference to the preparation of each road the emperor would travel on. A staffer would go ahead and make sure there were no pot-holes in the road, no stray sheep to cause an accident and that sort of thing. So John the Baptist is the staffer, as it were, who is sent ahead of Jesus to make sure there is a clear road to travel along. And how does John do this? Well he preached a hell and brimstone sermon or two about how the people had better get their lives in order, stop dodging taxes, help the poor, not use authority for their own benefit. He told them virtually to not just depend on the fact that they were Jews, or good "church people", but to start leading lives that reflected their faith in God. The challenge is to live out lives that reflect our belief in who God is for us. There is no waiting for a pussy cat here! This is preparation for the "big-cat"!

Similarly in the first reading from Malachi, there is both fire and brimstone, and pathos. The purifying process described here will be both active and passive. So, writes Malachi, when God does come, it will be like a refiner's fire or a fuller who beats and scrubs to get material clean, as well as using the harsh soap. To be held up against the light of God, as it were, can be painful and shows up impurities, which the furnace fire of God will cleanse.

But the pathos is in God's continuous mercy, for the prophet also writes: *For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. (Mal.3:6)* It is only because of God that we have not self-destructed, because God has not changed from the love of creating us, bringing us out of the land of Egypt, constantly rescuing us, and finally coming alongside us as a fellow human being, so that we may know God amongst us, *Emmanuel*, and God may experience our state-of-being first hand.

Further on in the first reading we heard, *Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes...Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord of Hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'* (Mal. 3:7-8). Listen to the pain of that, the waiting and longing on God's part.

"How shall we return?" By preparing our whole being for the coming of the "big cat", the coming of the incarnate, enfleshed Son of God two thousand years ago, and the coming of the Spirit of God in our hearts at

every moment. But while we are waiting and longing, God is waiting and longing for us even more powerfully. However, the “big cat” puts on a pussy cat persona and comes to win our hearts, not force us as a “big cat”. God waits to be invited onto our laps, as it were, and into our hearts and minds. As God does each week in this mysterious liturgy where God’s own life is offered to us in the bread and the wine.

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