

Hearing the Word. Philippians 1: 3-11 & Luke: 3 1-6

2nd Sunday of Advent – December 5th 2021 (by Caroline Seaton)

Last week Phil left us with a question at the end of his sermon – will we be ready?

Ready for what?

At this time of year, I'm sure many are panicking or getting stressed by the pending celebrations, or just by the thought of more restrictions which could impinge on our well thought out meticulous plans. For me and my preparation it's a case of if it's done it's done, and if it's not, it's not!

Our readings today, I think, are about hearing the word and being ready for the coming of the one true King which of course is the real meaning of Christmas.

The gospel gives us a brief introduction as to the political situation at the time, a verse from Isaiah, prophet of long ago with a pictorial image of how this will look for those who hear the word and respond. It sets the scene for the forth coming proclamation – preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah, the message That this king will be the King of all. He will be divine; he will be God. He's not just the son of another king – those are two a penny. This King will be the son of God himself.

In the first few lines of the gospel reading, we hear about the people in power at the time. Pontius Pilate and Herod. Names we recognise from the birth narrative which are relayed in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel.

Pontius Pilate was Governor of Judea, who gave into the crowd calling for Jesus to be put to death and setting free a known criminal, Barabbas. Herod, ruler of Galilee, was renowned for the accounts of his role in events leading to the execution of John the Baptist and Jesus – not to be confused with his father, Herod the Great. Herod the Great was King when Jesus was born, and he was the one who tried to scam the wise men as to the location of the baby born to be King. Supposedly to pay homage, but secretly to destroy the baby. He felt threatened by the risk of another king coming to reign! Two influential people in the eyes of the world at the time, but who had lost the God of their ancestors, leading them into following the strict observances of the Old Testament law with their hearts far from God. Luke is showing how far Israel had fallen, politically, with the Jews now ruled by foreigners.

This failing of those in power meant they were going off the one true path which brought John the Baptist, a humble man living in the wilderness, to hear the call of God, bringing people to repentance by baptising them with water, knowing that someone far greater was coming who would baptise with the Holy Spirit. Preparing the people for the greatest one ever to be born.

This event – the coming of the chosen one - was also foretold by Isaiah as mentioned in the gospel reading, and the book of Malachi, another reading set for today in the lectionary, both prophets of long ago from the Old Testament alluding to the long awaited coming of the Saviour of the world. They add to the long-awaited hope, preparing the world for the arrival of the one true King born to save the world.

And this preparing is as important then as it is now. Preparation to ensure we are ready to receive the gift of eternal life. Us being prepared and ready to hear the good news. 'Prepare the way of the Lord'.

But we like everything to be sorted, to be right don't we. We prepare things – meals for the week, for holidays, school, work, Church. All things that affect our everyday existence. But when things don't go to plan, putting us in a different situation, it throws us off our stride. It upsets the status quo, and covid certainly did that.

Perhaps life being different, shaking us out of our comfort zone is not a bad thing. It's easy to become complacent, laid back, and be content with the way life is. But Advent is a goodtime to reassess ourselves and our lives. Advent is a time of anticipation. A season of waiting expectantly. Our practical plans may take the usual frenetic panic, but it would be exciting if our hearts were in a state of frenetic excitement, waiting expectantly for the joy of the coming of the Saviour of the world. If we can channel the energy spent rushing round shopping, wrapping presents and cooking, into waiting eagerly for the arrival of a baby, born to be King, as foretold by wise sages and the prophets many years ago, what a joy that will be.

Knowing Jesus and having him in our lives, dare we be like John the Baptist- ordinary people called to be the voice in a world which doesn't know or doesn't want to hear the good news?

Are we in danger of becoming like Pilate and Herod, so entrenched in doing things our own way that we miss out on the moments of wonder that God offers all? This Christmas can we be the voice that brings hope to people who have not yet heard the good news of Jesus? That our lives are truly lived out in the service of Christ?

In our first reading from the letter to the Philippians, verse 9, Paul highlights the hope Christ brings us. He writes, 'and this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with the knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in 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'. A searching of our hearts and minds to enable us to be ready.

Going back to Phil's words - are we ready? In the turmoil of our preparations may we keep God upper most in our minds, rather than the turkey, finding a sense of peace which is only found in our Lord Jesus Christ – the baby born in a stable, son of humble ordinary people, daring to hear God's call despite their circumstances, and responding with love and trust. And with this uppermost in our minds – yes, we can ready. Amen.