

Hymns: **180 O come o come Immanuel**
 155 Come, Holy Ghost our hearts inspire
 182 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
 706 Longing for light (Christ be our light)
 172 Hills of the north rejoice

Readings: **Malachi 3.1-4**
 Luke 3.1-6

Between last week and this, I feel like our public economy has gone into overdrive.

By public economy, I mean those parts that show in shops and streets, those parts we hear (like it or not) in malls and café music tracks – the ways we are cajoled or tempted away from our money and taught what we need for happiness.

I was at a Conference centre for a two day meeting this week, and then in the Cambridge at the Leys School our partner school yesterday – Christmas is coming!

Prepare! Prepare! Let there be no gift unwrapped, no freezer un-stocked with frozen morsels and meats, no credit card unused in this public orgy of preparation. Can there really be room on my shelf for one more compilation cd of vanilla music sung by a heavily made up man looking into the middle distance on a seashore?

Our whole society mobilises as for nothing else except war - all together, as one whatever our religious belief around one purpose: Get ready! Fully inclusive, except of those of us who might be bereaved, or sad, or poor, or alone.

The public prophets of our age, advertisers and television call out: prepare the way, and I at least cannot avoid their call.

Get ready – but for what? What is at the end of all these special offers and sparkling decorations? What is the goal, the prize?

Today, in these few minutes, I want to consider the prophets calling us, in our preparation for Christmas. Which prophets call us, what they say, and what we might learn to hear.

So what prophets call us today in this season. I make a parody of the advertisers and shop windows – describing them as the public prophets of our age. I don't mean to be a spoil sport or for one moment deny the joy of giving gifts, or celebrating. One thing we do know about Jesus is that he liked a party and he liked a party not just with the proper Temple folk

but with the tax collectors, with less fragrant and polished people of all kinds – and personally I can think of nothing more exciting to celebrate in every way I know than the Word made flesh among us -

so do not hear what I am saying as Bah humbug on fairy lights and celebration. And that goes for anyone who went to the Ghana fellowship party last night, and might feel a little tired tonight. We should celebrate.

But a prophet in casual understanding is someone or something that creates a sense of urgency, who warns and convicts us. And the advertising and shop hoopla of endless music tracks (I often wonder the workers don't go mad) and promised beauty and plenty in our public economy does both warn and convict. In that sense, they are public prophets. Public, but false prophets.

They are so seductive perhaps because they promise such a pleasant affluence – a having of things, and love. They promise the trappings of the wholeness of life for which we are made, and for which we do rightly long.

The falsehood comes because they can't deliver it, and the double falsehood because so many are excluded even from what they can deliver – the idealised family and wrapped presents around a tree, happiness promised in a new lipstick, or DVD.

I have said before, in Christian understanding a prophet is not someone who tells the future, but someone who opens the present to us, to describe its reality in God's eyes and where God's purpose is in it.

A prophet tells us our present, and it can be very uncomfortable telling. In these minutes while I witter on and you politely listen or go about your own daydreams, how many people have died of HIV-related illnesses?

How many are walking long distance for water right now, how many within a mile of this place are cold in body, or in spirit? A true prophet exposes where we have lost sight of God's priority, these voices among them.

And it is not comfortable to think about – certainly not a warm fuzzy 'deck the halls' moment. What are these prophets saying?

Read what John the Baptist has to say in the next verse after our polite reading stopped in Luke 3! Or what Malachi has to say in the next verse after we stopped reading stopped in Chapter 3 there. You can go look it up, but suffice to say there is mention of exploiting the hired worker with low wages, not to mention the widow and orphan.

What prophets am I listening to, right now – and what prophets are you listening to?

From the very end of our canon of Hebrew scripture the prophet Malachi speaks, from a time when the second Temple has been re-built in Jerusalem – some 500 years before the Messiah. Malachi speaks, and reassures us:

I am sending a messenger – to proclaim God's coming –

What is his message, this prophet? You are going to be washed with strong soap. Purified.

Malachi's message is NOT – quick, get good enough or else. None of us can be good enough – who can stand? says the prophet – but DO NOT BE AFRAID – when God comes God will do the purifying and refining of our hearts – God will wash us with fuller's soap.

Last week you heard Dr Calvin Samuel say that holiness is not about what we do for God, but about what God does in us. Malachi builds on this – I won't be pure on my own, you won't – who can stand? God will wash us.

And not just me and you, but our world – our whole society and its public life – so that the best in it, that which is wonderful and joyous, the best in the life of our nations, our cultures, our science and art, the best in our loving and our own just action can shine forth.

Here I get a mental image of a woman washing clothes in a river, or a bucket – slapping and twisting the cloth in the soap and water, by tenacious, strong, careful attention preparing it again for wear. Somehow a washing machine doesn't make the same image for me with its insipid energy-saving whoosh whoosh – as that woman in the river - like God taking the next piece of clothing and my heart with it, and twisting me and rinsing me - preparing the way for God's coming.

Too often churches just make this about personal purity – or about national purity – and confuse purity with appropriateness – or with all being of the same opinion, or colour, or culture.

I want you to think about John the Baptist, and whether he would have fit in any church culture you can think of. Eats insects, and not because it is trendy or he's on tv. Wears camel fur and sandals – I'm not thinking he's had much of a wash. And then there's what he says – all the good polite folk go out to the wilderness and he tells them off – you vipers!

Beware ever of thinking we can judge how God will purify, what our purity means, by the standards of any polite society or any culture. Because prophets do not fit.

The prophet Malachi speaks to us of God's faithfulness, never abandoning God's people. Which is judgment, and yes, it rocks me in my comfort, and disquiets me when I think about the fruitless seeking of so much of our common life, and my own.

John the baptiser calls from the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the Lord!' No less urgent, his call than any advertiser, and far more durable.

And Isaiah has it, in the words quoted in the Gospel:

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked straight, and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

What will we learn to hear, this Advent!

In the internal world of your life, what will it mean to make the rough smooth, to prepare the way of the Lord? Not to iron you out into some stepford wife (be you man or woman)

or robot of Christian righteousness, but to uncover the true gift in you, to shake and wash the grit and dust off so that your full colour and giftedness shines out and you are free?

This is not about becoming more appropriate – but more Christlike. Kind, yes. Loving, absolutely. Humble, yes without a doubt – marked by all the fruit of the Spirit, this is what defines our ‘purity,’ not anything else.

What leaping truth will it mean to make the rough smooth, the valley low for our collective life, in this week as our leaders vote about Brexit, and our shops call us to consume, and the voice of need, of dispossession without power also speaks from the wilderness?

Malachi, Isaiah, John the Baptist – all using different language, all stirring us to urgent preparation this Advent.

So as we all go about our business and prepare for guests and travel this Advent, or for the ache of alone or even for the joyous parties:

Spend some time in these weeks, each day: just a moment between times - listen to God, pray and wait - Know that the Advent of our God is sure. God has come among us, committing God-self to suffer the wiles and ways and all the vulnerability of human life.

listen for the prophets – prepare the way of the Lord: pray, rest, listen, act – for all flesh SHALL see salvation and a little child shall lead them.