

SOON, AND VERY SOON

Isaiah 40. 1-11
2 Peter 3. 8-15a
Mark 1. 1-8

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In the Old Testament, the last twelve books are known as the minor prophets: Hosea and Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and the others. We call them ‘minor’ prophets not because they are unimportant, but because they are shorter than the others. Were you to sit down this afternoon and open your Bible to the book of Isaiah, for example, one of the ‘major league’ prophets, you would be sitting there for quite a while before you got to its graphic conclusion. Isaiah has sixty-six chapters in our Bibles and covers a lot of ground.

You would not have as much trouble, however, with Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament. Malachi has only four chapters in our Bibles. You could probably read through it easily in the time it takes me to finish this sermon (though I would prefer that you did not).

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament, the final word, as it were; but it serves less as a conclusion than as a cliff-hanger, announcing that the Day of the Lord is fast approaching. Quoting the Lord of hosts, Malachi writes, ‘See, the day is coming’, ... ‘Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes’ (4. 1, 5). Elijah, that great prophet of God from approximately 400 years before Malachi’s day: it is he who will be the indication that the day of the Lord is at hand. So get ready. And with that the Hebrew Old Testament ends. The book is closed, and the waiting begins.

And the world waited, and it waited. For four hundred years it waited. Kingdoms rose and fell; generations were born, and generations died. And still the world waited, with prophetic silence.

Then, a word comes: 'Repent'. After four hundred years, from out of the silence of the desert surrounding them, the people waiting in the city hear a cry and it says, 'Repent'. The new Elijah has come. The day of the Lord has come.

He wasn't hard to spot. Attired just as Elijah had been, in camel hair and leather (2 Kgs 1. 8), John the Baptist lived in the desert; he preached; and then he baptised; because when John cried repent, the people repented. They were expecting Elijah, and there he was (Matt 11. 14, 17.12). The time of waiting was over; the voice cried, 'Repent', and repent they did.

That all happened a long time ago. Today, John the Baptist seems pretty far from our present concerns, and it's hard to know what to do with him, two thousand years later, in a world that he could not have imagined. One of the incongruities of this festive season is that there is no way to get from late November to December 25th without encountering the Baptist. To get to Christmas, you have to go through Advent; and to talk about Advent is to talk about that strange man, John the Baptist. He was a fringe figure then, and he may seem to be a fringe figure now; but at neither time is he peripheral to the action. John the Baptist is right there at the centre. All four of the gospel writers talk about John before they talk about the ministry of our Lord. Even in St Luke's gospel, to meet the baby Jesus you have to first meet the baby John the Baptist. To get to Jesus the Christ, you have to go through John the Baptist.

And John the Baptist cries, 'Repent'.

Some of us may think that the ‘repent’ word strikes a discordant note as we prepare to joyfully celebrate Christmas. But it doesn’t have to be that way. The point of the repentance that John calls for is not the eradication of joy. Perhaps we have not thought of it in these terms, but to repent is to think differently about the world. As we repent of our sins, we embrace the reality that the day of the Lord has finally arrived. The world is being changed and *will be changed* by Jesus the Christ. The day of the Lord has come, and this is good news.

This may indeed make us feel differently. We know that this world is being changed and that it will be changed. The Lord has come and is coming, so we can have faith that the strong will not forever crush the weak; that the poor will not be forgotten; that in God’s time every tear will be wiped away. We know that Jesus Christ our Saviour will redeem the world from its pervasive sin and rescue it from its love of death.

To know that the day of the Lord has come also changes our outlook; because one of the consequences of repentance is hope. Hope is why the people from Jerusalem and all Judea made that long walk (twenty miles or so into the wilderness) to see John the Baptist. They did not go just so they could feel badly about themselves. They went to John because the kingdom of God was at hand; and that gave them joy and hope. They knew what the present world looked like. They saw its crises, its wars and rumours of wars; they saw their present darkness just as clearly as we see ours; and they knew (as we do) that only the one who is the light of the world can dispel it.

There in Jerusalem, after a four hundred year wait, that light of the world was dawning over the eastern horizon. You could hardly see it. But soon and very soon its brightness would fill the earth; and soon and very soon they were going to see the King; and soon and very soon there would not be any more crying, nor any more

dying, because the day of the Lord is at hand; soon and very soon, just as he said it would be, hallelujah.

The only ones that John the Baptist rebuked in the gospels were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They believed that they did not have to think differently, or to think about the world differently. They believed that they were already prepared for the day of the Lord. It is for this reason that they received John's withering attack ('you brood of vipers'). John knew that they had cut themselves off from their only source of hope. Redemption by God is the only true hope that we who are in this world have.

From Jerusalem and Judea, people left their homes to go see John. In a sense, you and I can still join them. Today, we can prepare ourselves; in repentance, joy and hope. We can think differently about the world; because soon and very soon, the King is coming. Hallelujah.

Amen.