

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. (Mal 3:1-4 NIV)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar— when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’” (Lu 3:1-6 NIV)

The opening chapters of Luke's Gospel are alive with anticipation and hope – Zachariah and Elizabeth had been praying to conceive a child, and miraculously in their old age God answered their prayer.

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John... he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth ... And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Mary also received amazing news, though for her the angel's message brought disruption to her plans; she was planning to get married to Joseph and bear his children. Gabriel's announcement of blessing required faith and trust to receive.

“Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.”

Somehow Mary understood that this child was not going to be Joseph's son and so this “blessing” would disrupt the plans Joseph and Mary and their families had made.

Sometimes God's blessing and favour towards us involves disrupting our plans and changing the course of our lives.

Whether an unexpected event is an answer to our prayers or brings dramatic changes to our plans, we must trust God, knowing that our lives are just one small part of His much greater plans. Mary teaches us to pray, "May it be to me as you have said."

These angelic appearances and miraculous events awakened hope and expectations amongst the faithful. Mary's song foresees God scattering the rich and proud, bringing down arrogant rulers and exalting and blessing the humble. She anticipates the blessings promised to Abraham coming to the faithful within Israel. Zachariah also sees in these events the hope of God redeeming His people.

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has brought salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us ... to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins ... to guide our feet into the path of peace."

The message to the shepherds was equally full of hope:

“Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord... Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.”

When Jesus was dedicated in the temple, Simeon said that Jesus was, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

At the time of Jesus’ birth, God sent both angels and prophets announcing the good news of the Kingdom, and God’s Messiah coming to His people. The news was welcomed and anticipation was high.

And so, with our Gospel reading, we come to the start of John’s ministry. His God-given mission, as foretold by Isaiah and Malachi was to “prepare the way for the Lord.” He did this by “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

Baptism was familiar to the Jews - it was another word for ritual bathing. Originally a ritual bath was a cleansing ritual for anyone who was ritually unclean prior to offering sacrifices in the temple (e.g. Leviticus 15:5). Baptism was also a requirement for a Gentile converting to Judaism. The Pharisees made ritual washing into an every-day event before eating and some, showing their piety, baptised themselves by full immersion before meals.

First John, and then Jesus, challenged the outward show of piety by speaking about the heart. “Make the inside of a cup clean, and the outside will also be clean” said Jesus.

And so John came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – baptism as a sign of a changed heart, not just a religious observance. In preparation to receive Jesus the Messiah, the people needed not just an outward observance of the Law, but an inward repentance; a recognition of their heart-rebellion against God and a sorrowful, prayerful plea for forgiveness and help to change.

John’s message was effective. We are told that crowds from the whole region came to be baptised, confessing their sins, including both the respectable and the despised. Pharisees, Sadducees, tax collectors and soldiers all came to be baptised by John. It seemed that his ministry of preparing the way of the Lord was truly effective. Everyone, we are told, was “waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.”

But our reading from Malachi indicated that when Jesus Himself came, they would nevertheless find the Messiah unpalatable.

“Suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?”

There is a note of warning here. “The Lord you are seeking will come – but who can stand when He appears?” Simeon also warned that Jesus would not be universally welcomed, saying,

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.”

Luke does not shy away from this contradiction between expectation and the event. The very first incident of Jesus’ ministry that he records is Jesus’ rejection by his own community in Nazareth. What is it that accounts for this eager anticipation and response to John’s message on the one hand and the cool and even hostile response to Jesus on the other hand?

When we look closely at the Gospel narratives we find that the Kingdom of God that Jesus announced was rather different from what was expected. The expectation of national peace, freedom and glory which the prophets foretold was not part of Jesus’ message. Instead He spoke

about relationship with God. That was never really on the cards – and it is a lot more difficult to cope with.

The Messianic expectations expressed by Zechariah, Mary and Simeon are pretty acceptable even in our modern secular context. Few would object to a righteous ruler bringing down the arrogant and establishing peace and justice for the poor. Even though Christmas has been turned into a consumer frenzy the underlying Christian message of peace amongst men is still totally acceptable. But Easter is another matter. People are happy to take the holiday but have no interest in the message. A restored relationship with God is not an attractive proposition to most people.

We like to set the terms of our relationships; we give and take as it suits us. We associate with those who make us feel good, and avoid those who irritate us. Many people who say they believe in God relate to Him in the same way. They believe the things that make them feel good and avoid anything that challenges the way they think or live.

But Jesus does not bring a relationship like that. He presents God as our Lord and King - One who knows every thought and on whom we depend for our every breath. God is the One before whom we live our lives and to whom we will ultimately have to give account for ourselves.

National peace and glory is so much easier to embrace than relationship with God. Religious observance is much less troublesome than relationship with God. But it doesn't bring peace, prosperity and glory – neither Christendom nor Islam nor any other religion brings peace by outward observance.

As we approach Christmas and think about Christ coming amongst us and anticipate His return, let us remember that the Gospel of Jesus is not about national peace and prosperity, but about our day-by-day relationship with Him.

True peace and true blessing comes only in relationship with God through Jesus. So let us make sure that we value and nurture our relationship with Jesus each day, welcoming His involvement in our lives.

“Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify them and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, acceptable to the LORD”

Let us welcome His refining fire and celebrate the righteousness we have in Him so that our lives may be an offering pleasing and acceptable to Him.