

A D V E N T 2 0 2 2

WATCHING
in HOPE





FOREWORD

Advent is traditionally a season of preparation, of watching in hope. This includes reflecting on the events recorded in the Old Testament, which led up to Jesus' birth. Two of the most significant events were the Exodus and the Exile. In the Exodus, God, through Moses, leads His chosen people out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. In the Exile, God's people are taken away from the Promised Land due to their failure over hundreds of years to respond to God's promises.

This Advent we are focusing on two of the many prophets that God sent. Prophets are people given specific messages by God to pass on to His people. Many, like Micah, were sent to warn God's people before the Exile. Others, like Malachi, were sent to help make sense of the Exile and later return.

We start on Advent Sunday with Moses, encouraging and warning God's people before they enter the Promised Land. We skip forward 600 years or so to Micah and hear his call for the people to worship God with the whole of their lives. Then, 100 years on, we

hear the prophet Jeremiah reflecting on the success of Micah, but warning that the Exile can still happen. Next, another 100 years later, we hear Malachi speaking to God's people after the Exile and pointing forwards towards God's promised future.

The prophets spoke in uncompromising, stark language. It was designed to make people uncomfortable. The prophets also had a deep understanding of God's mercy and love, and desire for justice and a better future for his people. All of this is reflected in Micah and Malachi.

For Christmas Eve and Christmas Day we will end with two songs that apply what we have heard. Hannah longed for a child for many years. We will hear her celebration after her son is born and dedicated to God. Samuel grew up to be a great prophet. Mary did not expect a child, but was waiting for the coming of the Messiah, God's Chosen One, who would bring about the future that God had promised. Her song is a celebration of the coming of this future through her son, Jesus.

As we watch in hope this Advent, my prayer is that we will encounter again God our Saviour.

**The Revd Dr Graham Rutter, Centre Lead,
Emmanuel Theological College.**



CONTENTS

WEEK 1

Starting Sunday 27th November ...6

WEEK 2

Starting Sunday 4th December ...13

WEEK 3

Starting Sunday 11th December ...20

WEEK 4

Starting Sunday 18th December ...27

CHRISTMAS EVE

Saturday 24th December ...33

CHRISTMAS DAY

Sunday 25th December ...34

WHAT'S NEXT?

Further resources ...35

The First Sunday of Advent

Read: Deuteronomy 30:11-20

'Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days.' Deuteronomy 30:19b-20a

We eat a lot of tomatoes in our house, especially tinned tomatoes. Soups, casseroles, chilli, curries and, of course, spaghetti bolognese all benefit from their juicy, fruity sweetness. There was a time when buying tinned tomatoes was easy. There were a couple of brands and you bought your usual one but these days there is so much choice that it feels like a major project to choose which ones to buy. There are basic, mid-market and premium tomatoes; whole, chopped and pulped tomatoes; tomatoes with garlic, herbs or chilli. There are even celebrity-endorsed tomatoes! There's so much choice, it's confusing. What is true for tomatoes is true for most things in our modern lives. Once upon a time we had a handful of television channels and now we have seemingly unlimited choices available on the internet. We are faced with confusing choices everywhere, all demanding that we choose to do one thing and therefore not to do others.

When Moses addressed the people of Israel in today's reading from Deuteronomy, their choices were much simpler but the potential to get distracted from the Lord's way was still an ever-present danger, just as it continues to be for us today and so Moses set a bold choice before the people, spelt out in the quotation at the top of the page (Deut. 30:19b-20a). Moses offered the people a choice between life and death. The way of life is the Lord's way and is to be found in holding fast to Him despite the tempting distractions that come our way because they only lead away from life and into death. As we journey through Micah and other books of the prophets this Advent we will see how again and again the people of God sadly allowed themselves to be distracted from the Lord's way of life into death. Only with the coming of Jesus did it become possible for us to truly live because He is the way, the truth and the life.

Just as Lent enables us to prepare for Easter, Advent is traditionally a season of preparation ahead of the great celebration of Christ's first coming at Christmas. It is a great opportunity to stop and take stock of all the choices we make in our daily lives. Which of those choices lead us closer to the Lord and which lead us away from Him? This Advent, try simplifying your life a little, setting aside some of those distractions and allow yourself to live a little by choosing God's way because that way leads to life.

The Revd Nick McKee, Director of Vocations.

Read: Micah 1:1-8

*'For this I will lament and wail;
I will go barefoot and naked;
I will make lamentation like the jackals,
and mourning like the ostriches.' Micah 1:8*

Have you ever had the experience when someone you knew very well said or did something that truly shocked you? It can be an unnerving experience. A moment when we realise someone we had 'figured out' is much more complicated, surprising, and elusive than we thought.

I wonder if you were shocked by anything God said or did in today's reading. The image of God as a witness for the prosecution (v.2)? God pictured as a divine warrior destroying the sites and images used in idolatrous worship (vv.3, 7)? God describing idolatry as prostitution (v.7)? That God would hold the leaders of Samaria and Jerusalem (the respective capital cities of Israel and Judah) to account for their sin (v.5)? Or perhaps, that God's patience with Israel would run out causing Samaria to be obliterated without any hope of future restoration (v.6)?

The verse printed above shocked me. Considering Samaria's fate, verse 8 pictures the horrors of exile that await Judah when they follow Israel's example. But the shock came when I asked, who's voice is this? Could it be God's?

God is speaking in verses 7 and 9, and yet commentators (both ancient and modern) routinely assume verse 8 must be either the prophet or nation's voice. No doubt a proper concern for preserving God's honour and dignity plays a role here. The image of the LORD stripped naked, weeping, and howling like an animal as He shares in the pain and isolation of Judah's exile is unbecoming. Shocking. Some may say, blasphemous.

However, at this time of Advent, we prepare to celebrate Immanuel (God with us). We remember that the Son of God took on the nakedness and humiliation of human flesh, bore our pains and sorrows living as a man, and endured the estrangement and exile of suffering for our transgressions on the cross. Therefore, as we prepare this Advent, for the day when Jesus will come down to the earth in judgement (vv.2-7), let us also remember His first coming to the earth in grace (v.8). Let us remember how He shared in our agonies and brokenness to deliver us from the exile of sin.

The Revd Andy Meeson, Vicar of St John's, Leyland.

Read: Micah 1:9-16

‘For her wound is incurable. It has come to Judah; it has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem.’ Micah 1:9

C.S. Lewis wrote, “What do people mean when they say, ‘I am not afraid of God because I know He is good’? Have they never even been to the dentist?”

Let me ask a question. When you read today’s verses do you know fear in your heart? Or are these verses an echo of a time past, interesting to read but not so relevant now?

Micah lived in a pivotal time in the history of God’s people. The northern kingdom of Israel rebelled against God, turning to idol worship instead. As a result God disciplined His people, bringing the Assyrian king to take them into captivity. But the sin of the people also spread to Judah. Eight years later Assyria attacked Judah brutally capturing its fortified cities and even approaching the very gates of Jerusalem. Today’s passage speaks of these events.

Micah’s oracle is a lament. He is mourning the sin ‘wound’ of His people. The wound that is incurable because His people will not turn from their rebellious ways, repent, and live rightly as God commanded. He knows that God will discipline His people for their sin because God is just and will not allow the guilty to go unpunished.

Micah’s oracle is delivered in terrifying detail with a poetic play on each city’s name to describe its fate. For example, Gath (which sounds like ‘tell’ in Hebrew) must *‘tell it not’* (v.10) lest the enemy rejoice over the defeat of God’s people. ‘Pleasant’ Shaphir will be taken into exile naked and shamed (v.11). Lachish (which sounds like the Hebrew for ‘team’) must ready their chariots (v.13). Mareshah (which sounds like conqueror in Hebrew) will itself be conquered (v.15).

Yet, even in all this terror and destruction there is hope. Did you notice how many times Micah alludes to or openly mentions exile? Yes, God will discipline His unrepentant people, yes God will remove them from their land of promise, but God will not wipe them out. Some will remain...some will survive...

Have we allowed sinful patterns to creep into our churches? Do we as a Church hold to God’s word? As individuals do we uphold truth in our churches or do we seek to fit in with the crowd? Where do we need to repent? Where might God’s discipline be needed in our church?

God is good...He is also just and God’s justice is rightly to be feared.

Janet Thorp, Lay-member, St Andrew’s, Leyland.

Read: Micah 2:1-11

‘They covet fields and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance [...] ‘Do not preach’ - thus they preach - ‘one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us.’

Micah 2:2,6

Micah in today’s passage rebukes the rich and elite people in Jerusalem for their corrupt practices. Corruption in higher places of societies within the people of God was rife. Micah, therefore, delivers a message from God against the greedy, wealthy landowners who are taking the lands of ordinary people. He denounces their covetous and destructive behaviour. That word ‘covet’, a reference to the ten commandments, is used to accuse them of breaking the law (Leviticus 19). Consequently, God has devised disasters against them; He will give them a taste of their own medicine; thus, those who stole the fields of others will have their own fields stolen from them. Micah’s stinging rebuke is met with opposition from his audience. Such threats are incompatible with the goodness of God, they say. These people have become so corrupt that they will only listen to the false prophets – to those who tell them what they want to hear. The truth was too uncomfortable for them. When the message is uncomfortable or awkward, we should ask ourselves why?

Like many other prophets (e.g. John the Baptist), Micah had an unwanted, challenging message. Yet, they proclaimed it because they knew God is good and just. He sees injustice and makes plans to respond fairly. God’s laws (e.g. the 10 Commandments) reflect His values, and they are a love gift from Him to us, His people. But as humans born in bondage to sin and selfishness, we have a problem keeping God’s law. Therefore, Jesus came as our representative to do what we could not do; He fulfilled the law of God through His cross, so when we are born again, God gives us a new heart (Jeremiah 31) and the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to obey His law. We are not yet perfect, but we can become more like Jesus Christ every day, and if we fall short, know that there is forgiveness in Christ when we repent (1John 1:9).

Although today’s passage is about God’s judgement, we should know that God’s judgement of His people seeks to lead them to repentance because of His love for them. Moreover, loving God rightly by keeping His commandments will bring us to love our neighbours sincerely, as God’s love spills over in our lives to touch and love our neighbours. The God we believe in cares about sins but rescues His people, gathering them and giving them hope. Therefore knowing this should provide us with the confidence to proclaim His message afresh to each and every generation, including those we see today.

Jean Kouacou, Ordinand, St George’s, Preston.

Read: Micah 2:12-13

'I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob, I will gather the survivors of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture; it will resound with people. The one who breaks out will go up before them; they will break through and pass the gate, going out by it. Their king will pass on before them, the Lord at their head.' **Micah 2:12-13**

I once went caving with some kids. A few minutes in, I had to return to the bus so I said I'd catch them up. Big mistake. I hadn't realised there were multiple tunnels in the cave. Which one should I take, left or right? All the tunnels looked the same. It was pitch black and silent. I was lost. My heart rate began to rise. It felt like hours went past and I began to lose hope of ever getting out. Suddenly there was a light in the distance bobbing towards me. The instructor had come to rescue me.

Perhaps reading through Micah has felt like being in that cave. Dark, depressing, hopeless. Perhaps Micah has shown us some weakness or sin and we feel like we can't go on. Today, light comes towards us. The light is God (v.13). He has come to His people to rescue them and to gather every one of His lost, weak and helpless people together. Not one of them will be missing. *'I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob'* (v.12).

At Christmas we remember that we don't save ourselves by climbing up to heaven but that God the Son came down from heaven to gather His people. Jesus is the good shepherd; He calls each of His sheep by name and no one can snatch us out of His hand. We are secure, safe, and saved in Jesus. We are safe, because Jesus fights to rescue His people. *'The one who breaks out will go up before them'* (v.13). Jesus didn't fight against our enemies in the normal ways that kings fight. The manger led not to a war horse or to a peace treaty but to the cross. On the cross, Jesus took on death and hell and it looked like He was beaten. He died and His grave was a dark cave, a tomb cut in the rock. Yet not even the darkness of hell could quench our Lord of light. Jesus burst out of His dark cave. He bored a hole through death and came out the other side into everlasting life. Our graves are no longer dark caves; Jesus has made them tunnels to the bright sunlight of new creation life with God.

Today, take your sins and weakness to God and praise Him that though you can't save yourself, Jesus can. Thank Him that Jesus entered our dark cave to gather us home into His heaven.

The Revd Dan Freeman, Assistant Curate, The Risen Lord, Preston.

Read: Micah 3:1-4

'Should you not know justice?' **Micah 3:1b**

It is increasingly being recognised that sustained oppression/abuse is rarely the product of a few bad apples that otherwise taint a healthy society/organisation. Rather a corrupt culture with many people of differing levels of culpability is often implicated. For some it is bowing to the pressure to look the other way, whereas others, typically leaders, have an active enabling role. It is such leaders that Micah vividly addresses today as we start a new section of his book.

Why can the rich and powerful get away with robbing others of their livelihood (Micah 2:1-2)? Because the leaders who have authority and responsibility to judge care nothing for justice and prefer to feather their own nests. They are the very opposite of what God calls His people to be: they hate the good and love the evil. Micah illustrates this in a disturbingly graphic way. These leaders are savage butchers. They skin and chop and eat the flesh of the people who come to them for justice.

To perpetrate injustice then is to brutalise other people around us. We can be glad that God sees and God hates this far more than we do. It is good news for those denied justice by human judges, that the judge of all the earth will do right. A time is coming when every deed will be uncovered and every wrong be righted when we stand before the Lord Jesus as judge.

In verse 4, God's judgement against these leaders is fitting if chilling. They have failed to listen to the legitimate pleas of the needy so the LORD will not listen to their pleas. They have rejected the LORD and His ways, evidenced by how they treat those around them, so He will hide his face from them. Therefore, now is the time to repent and seek the LORD while He may be found before disaster comes.

For ourselves, to what extent do we fail to love the good? How do we end up perpetrating injustice by the pursuit of our own agendas? When is it more comfortable or profitable for us to look the other way? Let us repent and return to our just judge and saviour.

The Revd Jonny Lee, Rector of All Hallows, Bispham.

Read: Micah 3:5-12

'filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might'

Micah 3:8

Chapter 3 of Micah consists of three oracles all of which see the rulers, prophets and priests of Judah censured for their failure to see that justice is upheld and corruption stamped out. Following on from yesterday where God had warned the people that a time was coming when their cries to Him would fall on deaf ears, Micah continues this narrative which ends with a damning indictment (v.12).

Rogue prophets have lulled the people into a false sense of security which has encouraged them to stray from God. The response? Silence. They would have no word and there would be no answer when they sought Him for guidance (vv.5-7). Micah denounces the rulers and judges who perverted justice for bribes, and priests and prophets who were prepared to compromise righteousness for monetary gain. They professed to lean on the Lord and vainly imagined that He was among them but they were corrupt (vv.9-11).

It all sounds familiar. As the teacher says in Ecclesiastes, *'there is nothing new under sun'*! God's word is as relevant today as it was then. Selfishness and corruption are sadly still a part of society today. Like the prophet Micah, God's people are called to stand for what is right and speak up where there is injustice. Many have done just that at great personal cost, Nelson Mandela is one who readily springs to mind.

Micah described his own ministry, saying: *'But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might'* (v.8) We may be tempted to think we can't possibly make a difference. Micah perhaps felt this too. But each of us in our own small way can play our part in building a fairer and more just society – of making a difference where kingdom values underpin all things.

It's important to understand, however, that it's not good enough to stand for social justice unless we also point people to something different – to Someone different. Transformation and change will only come about as individual hearts are changed, one person at a time. We do this by pointing them to Christ, whose advent we celebrate once again at this time.

Pray that God will be pleased to raise up people who are *'filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might'* (v.8) to lead and build up His people in these confusing days. Pray too for the opportunity to point a friend or a neighbour to Christ this Christmas.

The Revd David Craven, Parish Priest, St George's, Preston.

The Second Sunday of Advent

Read: Micah 4:1-8

'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' **Micah 4:3**

One of my favourite children's books is called 'Peace at Last' by Jill Murphy which recounts the struggles Mr Bear encounters as he is trying to find enough peace in his night-time surroundings to calmly nod off and enjoy a full night's rest.

Peace is the sort of word we throw around a bit isn't it: perhaps you have prayed or heard prayers for 'world peace', we may have read copious books which extol the benefits of working towards peace with campaigns, vigils or boycotts and necessary that these stands for justice are, it seems that our world continues to blunder along a path which distinctly lacks peace. Our current media operations bombard us with reports of communities torn apart by violence, hatred, selfish gain and despair and we ask ourselves questions on how we have arrived at this place.

Micah's audience found themselves in similar disarray: international mayhem fell upon Jerusalem, owing to corrupt leadership, unwise and self-indulgent behaviour by the people of his community - sound familiar? Micah's accusations are clear and feel very close to home – increasing affluence and self-aggrandisement lead to alienation from the close relationship with our God which our hearts seek. But there is hope at the end of the long tunnel, Micah points forward into all that God has planned for all people who desire to turn their gaze upon the One who brings good news, the One who gathers the lambs.

We may be familiar with Micah's image of swords turned to ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks; an image that might seem inconceivable, yet a beautiful hope, for the people of Ukraine. A human life is a great mixture of goodness, beauty, cruelty, heartbreak, indifference, love, and so much more, yet the timeless message that we ponder again this Advent reminds us that the God who spoke through the prophets of old, calls us gently and persistently to know the peace that the world cannot give: *'come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord'* (v.2). We are reminded by Samuel Wesley's hymn, 'Thou will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee', that, as we focus on the beauty and unending grace of God's love, spend time in the presence of the One who promises peace, we may find it in our hearts.

Sian Howell-Jones, Education Officer, Blackburn Cathedral.

Read: Micah 4:9-13

‘But they do not know the thoughts of the LORD; they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing-floor.’ Micah 4:12

A few years ago, I was walking in Wales. I dropped over a hill into a slate quarry and the valley was filled with fog. My map showed multiple paths, steep drops, pools filled with water and piles of rubble. It seemed like it was all going to go very wrong – dangers were all around and I couldn’t see a way through.

In our passage, disaster is upon the people. Have a look at the places where it says “now...” – this is showing what life is like for the people. The people can see that they are going to have to leave their land and go to Babylon. They can see many nations are assembled around them. Things are not going well for them.

But this is not the end of the prophecy – it’s not a story of doom, but one of hope. Things might be bad now, but God says, ‘*you shall be rescued*’ (v.10). The nations that gather round do not know ‘*the thoughts of the Lord*’ (v.12). God has not given up on His people. They might be going into exile but that is not the end of the story for them. God will rescue them.

For my walk in Wales, I prayed and suddenly the clouds lifted long enough that I could see a safe way down. For the people of Israel, God promises, ‘*the LORD will redeem you*’ (v.10). This meant an end to the exile and a return to their land. However, we also read this in the light of the one who came to bring ultimate redemption.

As we journey through Advent, we remember that Jesus came to be our redemption. God didn’t leave us helpless in the mess, when evil and difficulties seemed to be surrounding us on every side – Jesus came to rescue us. We also look forward, during Advent, to when Jesus will come again and all that is wrong with the earth will be restored.

I don’t know what life feels like for you at the moment, whether you feel you are surrounded by enemies or like you’ve got to leave your homeland, you might be experiencing a real time of difficulty. This passage in Micah reminds us that Jesus is our redemption, that He does not leave us helpless. He comes to be with us and He has a plan. He will, in time, free us from all pain and difficulty forever.

The Revd Amy Bland, Assistant Curate, Euxton Parish Church.

Read: Micah 5:1-6

‘But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.’ Micah 5:2

At any time of great difficulty it is human nature to look for a saviour. The popularity of Marvel/DC films, which create increasingly diabolical baddies so that we can see increasingly heroic acts of courage, shows this is still something which speaks to the human condition. The idea of the unlikely hero is a key ingredient in this. From Peter Parker to She-Hulk we love to see salvation coming from unexpected places. This is a narrative we often find in the Bible too like in today’s reading.

The land is in a time of distress with an enemy literally at the door whose might cannot be matched. The kings of proud Jerusalem have failed and Assyria looks unstoppable. So they look for a saviour and through this we learn a lot about what God’s salvation looks like. The first thing is that, to everyone’s surprise but by God’s great plan, salvation will come from Bethlehem. God loves to use the weak and lowly to shame the powerful, and in doing so averts our gaze from where the world expects it to be. What do we look to to save us from trouble? Our competence? finances? power? God is moving but challenges us to look again at the unlikely places and forgotten people as it is often in them that He is found. Secondly, salvation comes as an act of God and by His direction. He does not sit back and watch, or even stand back and create space for it to happen, but He is the one who gave His Son and who holds the plan for our salvation now just as He did then. Finally, God’s salvation is bigger than what we expect or hope for and is in contrast to that which it frees us from. Assyria uses the rod to strike the cheek; displaying power and bringing shame. The Messiah’s power will not only be greater in size and scope (literally to the ends of the Earth!) but will be restorative and bring the peace of a loving shepherd.

This passage starts with a focus on present troubles and ends with an incredible picture of what salvation through Jesus Christ, the Messiah, looks like. It manages to look up from a specific problem to see God’s great act of salvation for the whole world. The event it points to is the one we celebrate in a few weeks, and I pray you will know His salvation in the immediate things, and for all eternity.

The Revd Sam Cheesman, Chaplain to the Bishop of Blackburn.

Read: Micah 5:7-15

'Then the remnant of Jacob, surrounded by many peoples [...] And among the nations the remnant of Jacob.' **Micah 5:7,8**

Advent is a season when the Church looks back with celebration to the first coming of Jesus and looks forward in anticipation to His second. With His first coming Jesus initiated God's Kingdom which continues to grow until He returns to fully accomplish it. The Church has a holy calling as sign, agent, and foretaste of God's Kingdom. Micah points to the Church as the remnant of Jacob in today's reading (5:7,8). The remnant is the renewed Israel whose relationship is restored with God through Jesus' new covenant sealed by His blood on the cross (Jer. 31:31-34, Luke 22:19-20). The Church, either open or hidden, is present in almost every country as Micah prophesied, 'the remnant will be amidst many peoples and among the nations' (vv.7,8, Paraphrased).

Our task as God's Church is to witness to Jesus (Acts 1:8). Our witness, Micah says, is twofold. First is the refreshing effect. *'Like dew from the LORD, like showers on the grass'* (v.7). Those who live in hot and dry countries would know the significance of dew and showers as these revitalise life in parched land. Individuals, families, and communities without Jesus are like parched land. We can see this in our world where the lives of many are empty, dry, and thirsty. Our witness is like refreshing dew and showers to dry and thirsty lives when we share the good news of Jesus in word and deed. Lives are restored and revitalised through repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus.

Second, our witness may have a ravaging effect. Micah prophesied that the remnant *'shall be like a lion among the animals of the forest, like a young lion among the flocks of sheep'* (v.8). Many may take our witness as a threat to them and their beliefs and, therefore, refuse to repent and believe the good news of Jesus. Apostle Paul says, to them we are like an aroma that brings death (2 Cor. 2:16). We witness to Jesus. Rejecting Jesus means rejecting the living water (John 1:10). This result is deep thirst and ravaging souls leading to eternal death.

As we celebrate Advent let us pray that those who reject Jesus may turn to Him to be refreshed, revitalised, and be saved from the final Judgement at His return (v.15). Until then Jesus continues to build God's Kingdom and refine His Church through the work of the Holy Spirit (vv.10-14). Meanwhile, our task is to keep on witnessing to Jesus amid the peoples and among the nations.

The Revd Munawar Din, Vicar of St Luke's, Brierfield, & St Cuthbert's, Burnley

Read: Micah 6:1-5

'O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.' **Micah 6:5**

'Remember the fire!', I can say to any of my friends from university days, and they know exactly what I am referring to: the infamous fire caused by an unattended candle in our student house one frosty February night in 1989. How vividly I remember opening my bedroom door to a wall of thick black smoke and quickly closing it again, then the relief of hearing the voice of a housemate downstairs assuring me the air there was clear - I ran through the fire to safety. We don't tire of reminding each other how God kept us all safe that night.

Micah chapter 6 is the start of a new oracle: *'Hear what the LORD says'* (v.1), we are told. The Lord of all the earth is pictured challenging His covenant people in court. He invites them to present their case, and tomorrow we will consider their answer in verses 6-7, but first the Lord questions them: *'In what have I wearied you?'* (v.3). The word used for 'wearied' has the sense of growing impatient through waiting for something. If God really cared about them, why was life so hard? These great promises of future hope, of a Messiah who would restore their fortunes, were all very well, but where was God's blessing now? How easy it can be for us to feel 'wearied' in this way.

In verses 4 and 5 God challenges His people to remember four significant ways in which He has shown His saving power and covenant love to His people in the past. You probably know something of how God rescued His people from slavery in Egypt, and of how Moses, Aaron (the priest) and Miriam (a prophet) led them through the wilderness to the promised land. If you are less familiar with Balaam you can read the story in chapters 22-24 of Numbers, how Balak called him to curse the people of Israel, but God would only allow him to pronounce blessing on them. And in Joshua 3 and 5:1-12 you can read how the people set out from Shittim, east of the Jordan, and crossed the river on dry ground, making camp at Gilgal in the promised land.

For us, His people today, God can add:

'Remember the manger in Bethlehem! Remember the journey from the cross of Calvary to the empty tomb! Remember Jesus!'

May we never doubt His care for us.

Sue Champness, Lay-member of St John's, Leyland.

Read: Micah 6:6-8

‘what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God’ Micah 6:8

In our world today, millions of people are watching and waiting for a future with hope when justice, love, and kindness will cover the earth. The arrogant and oppressive powers will bow down to the throne of Jesus, be transformed and humbled. When sword will turn into ploughshare. We wait in hope that Jesus will rule the world with justice, love, kindness, and humility.

Let us focus particularly on our lives as believers. Watching with hope during the Advent season will require from us a serious retrospection as the Body of Christ. Paul describes in the first letter to the Corinthians that, we, as the Body of Christ are connected through Jesus. *‘If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it’* (1 Corinthians 12:26). The unity in the Body of Christ is that we are made in the image of God and have faith as children of God, *“In him we live and move and have our being”* (Acts 17:28).

It is very sad that often we turn a blind eye when it comes to the social, racial and gender injustices happening in our society and in the world. We need to wake up. For decades, we have watered our prejudices and let the dust of our individual and communal sins against humanity grow thicker. We have not respected and celebrated people and their humanity. We have not celebrated the beauty of diversity wholeheartedly. We have taken for granted the grace of God.

We, the Church, the Body of Christ, are watching with hope for the revival. A comprehensive call is made by the prophet Micah to those who are chosen and called by God. Micah reminds those who are chosen by God to use their lives with a deep sense of responsibility. To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, requires a sense of respect and love for all those who surround us with remarkable diversity.

Let us watch with hope for when justice, love, and mercy will cover the earth. And Church should humbly wait and watch with hope when the world will be reconciled with the living God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

May the spirit of justice, love, mercy and humility break, mould and fill our hearts. Amen.

The Revd Sarah Siddique Gill, Vicar of the United Benefice of St Stephens with St. James Church, Blackburn.

Read: Micah 6:9-16

‘The voice of the LORD cries to the city (it is sound wisdom to fear your name): Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city!’ Micah 6:9

There is a famous story about a wealthy man who was having his portrait painted. Menacingly, the man said to the artist: “This had better do me justice.” The artist responded: “It is not justice you need, it is mercy!” Justice is giving people what they deserve, but mercy, alongside grace, is giving them what they don’t deserve. Justice and mercy are not contradictory, but rather they are travelling companions and they walk the same road together.

The last section of Micah is in the form of a court scene. God is the counsel for the prosecution, and Micah is the counsel for the defence. The people of Judah, corrupted by sin, are standing in the dock and God is vindicating Himself. Ask any parent, and they will tell you that to be just and merciful at the same time is really difficult. Are you going to show justice and give your child what he/she deserves, or are you going to show mercy and let them off?

This is why the cross is necessary – an innocent person was prepared to suffer the punishment on behalf of the guilty. At the cross our sin can be punished and pardoned at the same time. There we see God’s perfect justice (the death penalty for sin is exacted) and also God’s perfect mercy (the guilty can go free) because the innocent has paid the price. If God forgave us without the cross, He would be merciful but not just. If He refused to forgive sin and punished it all, He would be just but not merciful.

This is why the Old Testament background, and the prophets we are studying throughout this Advent series are so important. We learn through them that God punishes sin, but also that He establishes the principle of the shedding of innocent blood providing forgiveness because God is both just and merciful. The one thing that matters in life is how human beings stand with God, and this will be shown, albeit imperfectly, in how they care for other human beings. If you are in relationship with God, then you will find yourself acting justly and showing mercy because that is exactly how He acts towards you. This prophecy also gives modern Christians a social action charter for life in modern society. The church should have a prophetic voice, alerting people to the evils of exploitation where they occur and providing a voice for the poor and disadvantaged. In so doing we are preparing for the time when we shall reign with Christ when He returns – something else we are particularly looking forward to at this time of year. This Advent, may we truly listen to the Lord calling to the ‘City’ of Blackburn Diocese and may we begin to exercise the wisdom that is the fear of the Lord.

Christian Pountain, Head of R.E., St Christopher’s C.E. High School.

The Third Sunday of Advent

Read: Micah 7:1-7

'The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left who is upright; they all lie in wait for blood, and they hunt each other with nets.'

Micah 7:2

Recently someone questioned my integrity. The comment stung because I place value on integrity in myself and others in leadership positions. When we asked more, they were really wondering whether I was sufficiently impartial which is an important but different point. In today's reading Micah is focused on integrity and trustworthiness in public life. Society is in breakdown; the Israelites are subject to Assyrian rule and key figures are not exercising the kind of leadership needed in national life. In the end why does this matter? Well, Scripture says those who are trustworthy in small things are trusted with larger things. Therefore, personal integrity and trustworthiness will remain important at home or in leadership in wider society. Micah is miserable because of what he sees around him. Good fruit is not to be found and *'there is no one left who is upright'* (v.2). Rulers accept gifts, judges bribes, neighbours are not to be trusted, family life is broken. No wonder he's miserable!

In the light of all this we might wonder what hope there is? In recent times we have seen the huge contrast between the integrity of Queen Elizabeth and others entrusted with aspects of public life. As I write this, we hope to emerge into a brighter future with new leadership. We must pray for those in such significant positions of leadership. For the love, justice, and mercy that Micah speaks of elsewhere needs to be at the heart of all who serve as leaders. Yet for all he sees around him Micah knows that things will be well because he hopes in the Lord, waiting for the Saviour that God promises. Micah is not just talking about the there and then. He is a prophet after all! He is looking towards the messianic age. In Christ, all things are well. That does not mean that life will always be straightforward. What it does mean is that we now have the gold standard for how to live with integrity and trustworthiness.

We are thankful that we have had a monarch who has led in that way. We pray today for all who lead in public life that they may commit themselves to lives of integrity and trustworthiness. We also commit to live with integrity and truth, that the light of Christ bestowed in baptism may shine from us.

The Venerable David Picken, Archdeacon of Lancaster.

Read: Micah 7:8-13

'when I fall I shall rise: when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me'

Micah 7:8

What are your memories of this time of year as a child? For me, I'm walking in the cold, dark rain, with buses splashing puddles as we wait for them to leave town; back to our home. The Christmas lights are battered by the wind, and it's about as far away from the films *White Christmas* and *Holiday Inn*, and Bing Crosby, as you can get.

At times, the book of Micah has felt like those trudging dark evenings. "If only we'd have come yesterday!" "If only we listened to Michael Fish." "Don't the people in charge know what they're doing?" "I told you this would happen!"

In today's reading, almost at the end of Micah, we start his final message of hope in the gloom. A prophesy of triumph for those who have listened, to balance the disaster foreseen for those who haven't. But, and it's a big but, we can read this as God punishing us on earth for our sins, and rewarding us for our faithfulness. The more we perform His commandments, mitzvahs, the more we will be rewarded. It's a danger that in faith I can fall into too. The more I pray, the more good works I perform, the more God will reward me. But that is not the message of Micah, nor the message of Advent and Christmas. It's not even the message of *Holiday Inn*.

It's God's love that is the dynamic, irresistible force, not my will and ability to follow His commandments. I try to follow His will, His flowing river of love, not for my reward, but in response to that shining beacon of everlasting light and warmth.

Back at that bus stop, one golden giant star is waving on the wires that straddle the street. It is calling me on, pointing the way, raising my gaze from the grey, soggy clothes to the sky. It even seems to have broken free from the wires, inviting us to dance along the way with it.

Half-way through Advent, do we need to look up? To see the signs pointing to hope? To hear the voice crying out to us? Am I ready yet to make that journey once again, to kneel in the straw and, poor as I am, bring all that I can give Him? In the darkness of my life, am I ready to re-discover the Light again?

The Revd Adam Thomas, Director of Whalley Abbey.

Read: Micah 7:14-20

'Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.' **Micah 7:18-19**

I woke up one morning 26 years ago with that Monday morning feeling of 'same old, same old' transpiring in my head. What I had mapped out for the day was the regular way of being, which on this occasion was fighting the effects of actions made that had backfired to the point where sins committed slapped me day after day in the face... maybe you have experienced this too? I had hit rock bottom, and was going through life doing my own thing, which was not working. Unconsciously I was hurting others and not fully realising the effects along with the effects of sins made against me.

I then heard, in the depths of despair, "change." God knew, as He always did, that Gloria thinking she was a hopeless sinner and had no right to compassion, was wrong. Our God sat me down and made it clear that He had not forsaken me and had been waiting 24/7 for me to look to Him. This was that time, He threw my burgeoning sins in the mire, and we reconnected fully; slate wiped clean! Forgiven and forgiving! His love and truth have carried me through till now and will forever.

Micah directs us through feelings of hopelessness to the realisation that change is afoot. God can make things better if we are willing. There can be a change and despair does not need to consume us. There is always hope, even within the darkness, God's light comes through Jesus at Christmas, and thereafter.

This Advent let us be led by Jesus to the Father to realise that it does not have to be, 'same old, same old.' There is change, and change for the better that awaits us, a focusing on what needs to be changed, and how that change can come about! It does not have to be a same old day, but a brand-new day filled with the light of Jesus in our lives and the Holy Spirit directing our every move.

Let this Advent open-up the opportunity secured by Jesus for you, me, and all of us to realise a wonderful eye-opening fact, that our God is full of compassion and will not hold things against us, if we are open to that change. Jesus was sent for that reason, as were the prophets before Him to pave His way to us.

Gloria Birdsall, Lay-member of St Peter's and St David's, Fleetwood.

Read: Jeremiah 26:1-8, 16-19

'Thus says the Lord: Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord; speak to them all the words that I command you; do not hold back a word. It may be that they will listen, all of them, and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil doings.' **Jeremiah 26:2-3**

How do you respond to being challenged or corrected? In our passage today, the prophet Jeremiah is told by the Lord to bring a word of correction and challenge to the people of Judah. But this word wasn't just to be given anywhere, it was to be spoken in the heart of Judah's sacred worship site: the Temple. In this place where many seemed to feel they were safe because of their privileged position, Jeremiah warns them that they are not. They have continued to ignore the word of the Lord through previous prophets such as Micah, and have not heeded His call to repent and return to worship and obedience. Instead, they have staked their security in the privilege of having access to the Temple, seen as the heart of the nation and their covenant with Yahweh. Jeremiah reveals this attitude as folly.

When we are challenged or corrected, it is a temptation to shoot the messenger. We can easily turn and attack or dismiss the person who has brought these uncomfortable words, rather than examining them for any truth they may contain. This is exactly what the religious leadership of Judah did when they were confronted by Jeremiah. In fact, they demanded a death sentence for this prophet who threatened their sense of security and privilege. How dare he bring a word against what they held most dear! But there were other people of influence who called the people to a different response. They recognised that Jeremiah was speaking a word from the Lord, and looked back into their history to remember how King Hezekiah had responded to the prophet Micah. Instead of putting him to death, he and the people responded with repentance and fear of the Lord.

This passage in Jeremiah provides a hinge point between the prophet Micah and the coming destruction of the Temple and the later prophecies of Malachi. It shows us the point of decision the people were faced with when they heard the word of challenge and correction from the Lord. It also presents us with two possible responses to correction. Do we shoot the messenger or remember the words of God in the past, learning from how others have responded faithfully? In this season of Advent as we prepare our hearts for the gift of Jesus Christ, let's be people who do not cling to things that give us a false sense of security, but rather hear and heed the word of the Lord, even when it is uncomfortable.

Amy White, Lay Training Officer.

Read: Malachi 1:1-5

'I have loved you, says the Lord. But you say, 'How have you loved us?'

Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the Lord.

Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.' Malachi 1:2-3a

Malachi was the last Old Testament prophet, preaching at some point in the fifth century BC, a little while after the return from exile and rebuilding of the temple when the religious temperature in Judah had grown cold and the moral conscience dulled once more. The Book is structured around six 'court scenes' in which God and His people are variously prosecutor and defendant. It is the Lord, in these first five verses of the Book, who appears in the dock first, and it is His claim to have loved His people that is made subject to cross-examination. Though they'd returned to their land, the Jews were still mere vassals of the Persian empire, experiencing huge economic challenges and battling constant social unrest. Their restoration had been a bit of a damp squib, falling so far short of their expectations and, they believed, of God's prophetic promises. 'Love us, you say? Call that love?' The Lord, it seemed to them, had neglected, ignored, and forgotten his people – not loved them.

It is in this context that the Lord through Malachi brings up the case of Jacob and Esau. Both twins were deplorable toerags, and both deserved only God's rejection and holy disregard. And yet, even before the twins were born, the Lord had freely determined to shower His undeserved, unprompted love and grace and mercy upon Jacob (the younger twin), while Esau would receive the judgment he deserved. To freely choose to pick out Jacob to be the object of his love was de facto to pass over Esau, to reject ('hate') the elder brother. The subsequent history of Esau's kingdom Edom (Malachi 1:3-4) shows what happens to those who get nothing but what they deserve. The history of Israel, by comparison, shows what happens to those whom God loves. Setbacks? Yes. Disappointments? Yes. Suffering? Yes. But oblivion? No. The Lord forgetting them? Never. The Lord renouncing His promises? Perish the thought! After all, in His love that will not let them go, He was still speaking to them through a prophet; He was still calling them back to faith and obedience so that He might bless them once again; He was still preparing the way for the Messiah.

There may be lots going on in your life right now that you could allege as evidence of the Lord's lack of love for you. But since He still speaks to you by His Spirit through Scripture; since He still gives Himself to you in the Sacrament; since the Church still endures despite its myriad faults and failings; you can know that He has loved you and loves you still. Above all, when tempted to doubt God's love for you, be slow to interpret your own circumstances and quick to look to Calvary. Tempted to cross-examine God's love, instead examine the Cross.

The Revd Tom Woolford, Vicar of All Saints, New Longton.

Read: Malachi 1:6-9

'You say, 'How have we despised your name?' By offering polluted food on my altar. And you say, 'How have we polluted it?' By thinking that the Lord's table may be despised. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong?

And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong?

Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favour? says the Lord of hosts.' Malachi 1:6b-8

When he was little my son loved to give gifts (he still does). As a 3 year old he didn't have much in the way of assets to gift. But what he did have, he lovingly shared. Many a time he would run up to me, his face lit up with a beaming smile, having found the largest, finest, bright yellow dandelion in the grass before him and proudly declare that I could put it in a vase when we got home. A weed to some, that dandelion came with all the love that he had.

In the bible passage we read of someone else's gift giving: the priests of Israel. In the Jewish book of law there are clear instructions of what gifts are to be given to God and sacrificed on the alter at the temple, and the priests were falling far short of these requirements. God chastises His priests for not honouring Him in their gift giving but more worryingly the priests seem oblivious to the fact that they have not been honouring God and they question Him so.

The priests were to offer an animal without 'defect' (Leviticus 1). They were to offer the best of what they had and yet they had started offering blind, sick and lame animals. The slip in the standard of giving won't have happened overnight. It would have been a gradual process, each sacrifice not quite as good as the last time. Starting with just a small blemish on the skin of the animal, but 'its OK, its nearly perfect' and then a slightly larger blemish, 'its OK, its nearly as good as yesterday', until they end up giving the animals that are no use to them as part of the herd so 'they may as well go for sacrifice'.

God does not ask us for lavish and extravagant gifts and for many of us we simply don't have the means to do this any way. What is important to God is how the gift is offered. A line from a familiar carol sums things up beautifully:

'What can I give Him? Poor as I am....Give Him my heart'.

Where are you in your relationship with God? Are you offering the largest, finest, bright yellow dandelion you can find or have you ended up with blind, sick and lame animals?

The Revd Liz Gethin, Assistant Curate, St Cuthbert's, Fulwood.

Read: Malachi 1:10-14

‘For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.’ Malachi 1:11

In the previous verses and those that follow, Malachi has made it clear that the offerings that were being brought before God were not good enough. The people were not giving their best to God and were trying to get away with giving less than the bare minimum. Malachi really wanted to make people realise that this wasn't good enough. When we give to God, it should be with a heart that recognises God's great love and grace towards us, with a heart that is filled with thanksgiving and generosity towards our maker.

Yet, despite the overall push of this passage being about the people of Israel failing to offer God their best, we see in verse 11 that there is hope. Whilst at the time of Malachi, people were only giving God their leftovers as an offering, one day *‘incense and pure offerings will be brought to me...’* (v.11). Pure offerings will be brought before God, where there has only been cheating, half-offerings.

What's more, these offerings are not going to be offered only by the priests in Israel, nor even by the people of Israel, rather they will be offered by *‘the nations,’* and *‘in every place’* (v.11). Whilst those who seemed pious and holy in the day of Malachi were giving insufficient offerings, one day even the Gentile would give pure offerings of incense. Not only were the holy people to offer up the best they had, but so too would the poorest, most ungodly Gentile.

Of course, as we are in the season of Advent, we can hopefully relate to these words as we, too, look forward to the perfect offering. As Christians, we recognise that when we get things wrong, there is no sacrifice sufficient to take away our sins once and for all, except for One. Only Jesus' death can take away our sins, no other offering, no matter how pure, can even come close. And Jesus didn't die just for the people of Israel, but for all of us; that all nations, in every place, can at last come before God.

This day in Advent, let us look back to that day, to the birth of the perfect One, in whom and through whom we can at last be a part of the pure and perfect offering to God, not through our own merit but His. Perhaps you could take the time today to give thanks for Him, for the hope that we have in Him and His generosity in saving not just the Jew but also the Gentile, the lost and last.

The Revd Jordan Bentliff, Church Planting Curate, All Saints, Chorley.

The Forth Sunday of Advent

Read: Malachi 2:1-9

‘For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts.’

Malachi 2:7-8

Ouch! This passage makes uncomfortable reading for me as a priest. And particularly this week, when we have so many opportunities to present the Christian message to those who love to come to church at Christmas who may rarely come at other times. The prophet sets out a clear vision of the role of the priest as teacher, guarding knowledge and giving instruction as the messenger of the Lord of hosts (v.7). All of us who preach and teach, whether ordained or lay, will be aware of times when we have truly felt we had a message from God, and when others have clearly been drawn closer to God through a message we have delivered.

But those of us who preach and teach will also remember times when it all fell flat – sometimes because we had not listened enough to God in prayer before daring to speak in His name, of which the prophet warns in verse 2, *‘If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name...’* Yet we can also think of times when we really tried to listen but seemed to hear nothing from God as we tried to prepare. I can think of times in the week before Christmas when I have been just too exhausted to listen well in prayer. That's why I now try to set aside time at the start of Advent to write my main Christmas sermon!

This passage is a solemn warning about the importance of giving priority to teaching, and of the harm that can be done when we neglect it or abuse it, or fail to live by the standards of God's covenant which we teach to others. God will hold to account preachers and teachers, those who have harmed rather than helped those in their care – *‘I will put you out of my presence’* (v.3). However, years of ministry have taught me that I am not the best judge of how a sermon went. There have been times when I really struggled with a message, and came away feeling a complete and utter failure, only to discover (sometimes much later) that particular talk changed someone's life. Wonderfully, the Spirit of God blows where He wills, sometimes through us, and sometimes in spite of us. Please pray for preachers you know, that they will be God's messengers this week.

The Venerable Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn.

Read: Malachi 2:10-17

‘Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?’

Malachi 2:10

Our world is littered with broken promises. Advertisers, politicians, spouses, children give us their word and then fail to deliver. The latest gadget doesn't transform our lives, society is not "levelled up", we are not always loved and cherished, the bedroom is not tidied. We feel let down, and rightly so, but when we honestly examine our own consciences, we find that we are no better than anyone else. We are all faithless beings—we may mean what we say at the time, but when keeping our word requires self-sacrifice or even just causes us inconvenience, we are quick to renege on the deal.

Through Malachi, God is calling His people out on their unfaithfulness. He reminds them that they are all His children, part of the treasured possession that He rescued and made a covenant with, through Moses. As God's family they should be united in the faith, seeking to live together in the way God has commanded in His Word. Yet rather than being a community of faithful, holy people, they have become a faithless community where God's laws are not upheld.

This faithlessness is illustrated by their attitude to marriage. Throughout the Bible God takes marriage very seriously. It is meant to be a picture of God's covenant relationship with His people. An exclusive lifelong, faithful relationship. And yet Israelite husbands are being unfaithful to their wives, breaking their marriage promises, spurning God's Word and profaning the special relationship that God's people have with Him. No wonder God is rejecting their offerings.

We may not have been unfaithful to a spouse, but we have all lived in a way that betrays our relationship with God as our Heavenly Father. We have all disregarded His Word, put our own desires before His, and not loved our neighbour as ourselves. We too deserve to be rejected by our perfect creator. Yet amazingly we have a God who is wholeheartedly committed to us, a God who is by nature incapable of faithlessness, a God whose promises are all "Yes" in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). All He asks of us is that we acknowledge our unfaithfulness and turn to Him for forgiveness, trusting Him as our Saviour. Therein lies the true peace the Christ-child came to bring.

Carolyn Bullock, Lay-member of St Paul's, Withnell.

Read: Malachi 3:1-5

‘See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple.’ Malachi 3:1

This morning we have a passage which sums up the liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas, and Epiphany. The passage is read in the Church on Candlemas, the presentation of Christ in the temple, which brings the Epiphany season to a close, however, it is clear from the beginning of the verse 1 that, prophetically at least, John the Baptist, and thus Advent, is in view. We often take this as a joyous prediction but in the context of the book of Malachi we need to be more wary.

Malachi is telling those who follow the Lord that judgement will begin with them. The people of Israel are crying out for the Lord to come to deal with their enemies with little or no thought to the state of their own hearts. We celebrate joyously the Christmas feast, and rightly so, but have forgotten that God's arrival is a two edge sword. Malachi warns us in verse 2: *‘who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?’*. Too often we sit self-righteously asking God to come and judge those 'other' ones who we think of as wrong, as evil, as incorrect, and yet when He does come God will turn first to us, His people, and point out our failings and faults. Consequently, there is a very real danger that we won't be ready. After all, this is what happened to the Jewish people as they looked for the Lord to come, and yet in Jesus He was already in their midst. John the Baptist points Him out (John 1:29-31) and the vast majority of God's people simply ignored their Messiah. Christmas, then is a time to celebrate, but it also brings with it a challenge and indeed a judgement which is summed up in the cleansing of the Temple (John 2:13-16). Here, then, is the point of the Advent season, to help us to prepare properly for the coming of the Lord. Advent is deliberately set aside by the Church so that we might look inward and deal with our own sins, so that when the Lord comes again, we might be more ready than we currently are.

Christmas is now just five days away and we may be rushing around getting the cards, presents, and food ready... but are we ready, are our hearts ready, for the coming of the One who will judge His people? When He returns we will finally see a time of justice, but only because the world, including the Church, have been purified and put right (v.4): *‘Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years’*. Brothers and sisters, we rightly yearn for justice and peace, but need to recognise that this must mean a change in our own thoughts and actions, ones which the Lord will judge when He comes. So pause amidst the busyness and prepare, through examination of your own heart, so that when the Lord comes, you will be fully prepared to receive Him with joy.

The Revd Michael Print, Vicar of St George's, Chorley & All Saints', Chorley.

Read: Malachi 3:6-12***'Return to me, and I will return to you'* Malachi 3:7b**

A common objection to the Christian faith is 'why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?' This is of course a difficult question for the believer, but today I want to focus not so much on why God allows bad things, but on why we as humans often disregard God's teachings, only then to blame Him when things go wrong.

This passage from Malachi is not a comfortable passage, it challenges us with the words *'Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me!'* (v8). I suspect that most of us would be horrified to think we were robbing God, that we are taking something away from Him. And yet each and every time we give something a higher priority in our lives than God, we are robbing Him of the place He deserves in our lives and in our hearts.

In this particular instance the example is given of the tithes of grain, for us today a good comparison would be our financial giving. Are we giving sacrificially? In other words, when budgeting our money, do we first decide what to give to God and go from there, or instead do we work out what we need to spend on everything else and then give what little, if any, remains to God.

God wants us to put Him first. First in everything, first in our finances, first in terms of the time we devote to the reading of Scriptures, prayer and taking of the sacraments, first in our thoughts when making big decisions ... and little ones!

Putting God first means we will have no other God than Him; that God will not have to compete for our attention. Putting God first means we do not ignore Him and His teachings during the good times of our lives, then when something goes wrong blame Him for the bad things.

Putting God first means we hand over the control of our lives to God and let Him lead us. But then we have the most amazing promise for as God also says, *'Return to me, and I will return to you'* (v.7). God is waiting eagerly for us to return to Him and put Him in control of our lives. This Advent let us take time to consider the place God has in our hearts, and then work to make the changes so that He is first in every area of our lives.

The Revd Ann Beverley, Vicar of Christ Church, Wesham.

Read: Malachi 3:13-18

'You have spoken harsh words against me, says the Lord. Yet you say, 'How have we spoken against you?' You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts? Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape.' **Malachi 3:13-15**

Advent reminds us that Jesus Christ is the focal point of history regarding the past, present, and the future. The Jews, after returning from their captivity in Babylon of seventy years, had seen the favour of God returned to them by seeing their temple rebuilt again; yet not all their fortunes had been restored. There was economic hardship as we are seeing in our nation today, with all its attendant problems, yet many of them had concluded that there was no benefit in serving God. Why bother when God seemed to be prospering those who had no time for Him?

However, there were still devout Jews who truly loved God and encouraged one another in their faith. They spoke often to each other with loving and encouraging words, looking beyond their present difficulties. The Bible tells us that, *'the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom'* (Proverbs 9:10). In Advent we look back at what the coming of Jesus means for Christian believers, but also for the whole of mankind. We look forward as well to His promised return in glory, sometime in the future, when His Kingdom will be fully instituted in peace and blessing to the world.

A solid faith in God can endure the hardships of life, in whatever form they come. It is so easy to make God the focal point of the 'blame game' as do many. We should never blame God for the ills of society as did the Jews in Malachi's day, but we should look to Him at this time of Advent as He is the one who will put everything right in due course. The Kingdoms of this world will be replaced by the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ and He will reign forever. Amen.

Let us inspire each other at this time of Advent as we look to all our Christian privileges. Malachi reminds us that God keeps a book of remembrance in the way we speak of Him to our fellow believers, as we encourage each other in the fact that Jesus has come down to us with all His saving love and grace. Advent should prime us for these heavenly conversations where we encourage each other in our faith.

The Revd Victor Sohail, Assistant Curate of The United Benefice of St James, Altham & All Saints, Clayton-le Moors.

Read: Malachi 4:1-6

‘See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.’ Malachi 4:1-2

When December arrives I love the opportunity to sing Christmas carols once again; it’s like catching up with old familiar friends that haven’t been seen all year. Quite likely this month you’ve already been to a carol service and lifted your heart to Jesus with these memorable words from one of Charles Wesley’s hymns: “Hail the Sun of righteousness... risen with healing in his wings.” (see ‘Hark! The herald-angels sing’) But Wesley would be the first to admit that he borrowed the words from an earlier writer – the prophet Malachi.

In ancient art (and in children’s pictures) the sun is often represented as a bright yellow disc with flames (wings) flaring out from its perimeter. The idea behind the wings in a painting is that they convey something of the sun’s warm rays shining down upon the earth. And so Malachi is prophesying about Christmas and telling his readers to look forward to the day when the Lord Himself will shine into this dark world with the splendour of His healing, reconciling love.

But let’s not rush to the joy of the Christmas message too quickly. You’ll notice that we’ve glossed over verse 1 in the passage set for today. In contrast to the life-giving warmth promised in verse 2 we have a warning that there will also come a day of scorching hot judgement. And it’s the same Lord who brings both to our world. So we’re reminded that we should both tremble and rejoice before God. Tremble because our God doesn’t fail to notice and be offended by the wickedness that happens in the world; and rejoice because in His wisdom the same God has a plan in place to save us from His own blazing judgement.

So let’s not leave the season of Advent just yet. Let’s humble ourselves and revere the Lord’s name. Let us prepare for Christmas by acknowledging how much we need His reconciling love both in our relationship with Him, and in our relationships with others (v.6).

The Revd Canon Mark Jones, Vicar of Padiham Parish.

Christmas Eve**Read: 1 Samuel 2:1-10**

‘He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour.’ 1 Samuel 2:8

“What have you asked for for Christmas?” This is the standard question asked to wide-eyed children, transported into a magical world of the Santa’s grotto in the pre-Christmas shopping rush. “Will I get what I have asked for Christmas?” When I was a child, this question reached fever pitch in my mind by the time it was Christmas Eve. I used to scour the house for tell-tale signs of wrapping paper, boxes secreted, receipts discarded. My poor parents. We soon grow up to become more cautious. We don’t want to be disappointed. We’re embarrassed to ask for anything in particular for Christmas. This affects the way we ask God too.

Hannah throws caution to the wind. She is desperate, open-hearted. She asks God for a son (1 Sam 1:11). She gets what she asks for (1 Sam 1:27). Today’s reading is her heart-felt song of thanks. She gives back her praise at full throttle. To Hannah, this incredible gift of her son speaks volumes about God – He doesn’t just take pity on her, He is able to do immeasurably more: *‘he raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes’* (v.8). He is the God of the Great Reversal. A beautiful foreshadowing of Mary’s song, which we will enjoy tomorrow.

Hannah and Mary were given seats of honour. Is it because both these unlikely women were so open-hearted, so courageous in their faith that God could deliver, that they were entrusted to give birth to sons who would change the course of history? Notice how they both gave back their precious sons to God, surrendered in very private pain. They had learnt to handle His gifts lightly, and so were trusted greatly.

God consistently chooses the unlikely; those who will trust Him greatly.

God consistently gives immeasurably more than we can ask.

On this Christmas Eve, when we remember how God gave up everything – even His own Son for us (Romans 8:32), what is God asking you to surrender? Take time to ponder: are you His unlikely choice? He asks us to trust Him greatly, and He gives us more than we can ask. May we follow the example of Hannah and Mary and offer Him the most precious gift we have – our very selves.

The Rt Revd Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster.

Christmas Day

Read: Luke 1:46-55

‘And Mary sang, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord.’ **Luke 1:46 (NIV)**

This Advent, we have heard the story of eight centuries of desperate yearning. The prophets yearned for God to come amongst His people and establish His rule. They longed for Him to show His mercy so that the many sins of the people might be wiped out. They desired God’s justice for the poor.

And now today all that yearning has found its satisfaction. Not with revolution or bloodshed or some mighty and irresistible act of God, but in the cry of a tiny little child.

That’s why Mary sings her song. Fresh from Gabriel’s news that she is pregnant with Jesus, she delights and rejoices with Elizabeth that every promise God spoke through the prophets has been kept. Listen again to some of her words.

‘The Mighty One has done great things for me.’ (v.49) In this baby God has come amongst His people. The child in the straw is God in our midst, and because God has come to share our life, so we can share His life for ever. That’s why, this Christmas, we will worship the Christ-child with our whole being.

‘His mercy is for those who fear Him.’ (v.50) By going to the cross, Mary’s child will die the death we deserve and set us free from sin. That’s why, this Christmas, to the manger we will bring our sins and there find mercy and forgiveness.

‘He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.’ (v.53) In this baby the kingdom of justice is revealed. That’s why, this Christmas, we will pledge ourselves to work for justice and for a world in which all have enough.

Of course God’s saving work is not yet complete. We still must yearn for the day when Christ will return and His kingdom will be revealed in all its fullness. But because of Christmas Day, we know that triumph is guaranteed. And in the strength of that promise, we can work today for the justice and peace of God’s future kingdom.

So this Christmas Day, we who have watched in hope can rejoice and sing with Mary. In her child, the living God has come amongst us and shown us the Kingdom. God is with us, so we can be with God.

The Rt Revd Philip North, Bishop of Burnley.

WHAT’S NEXT?

We really hope you’ve enjoyed walking through Advent with this booklet. If you’re wondering how you can continue with this pattern of daily reading there are a whole host of resources available to you. For ease of access, many resources are now available either online or as apps. A few suggestions are:

Daily Prayer

www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer

Daily Prayer is available free as an app or on the Church of England Website and gives complete services for Morning, Evening and Night Prayer in both contemporary (Common Worship) and traditional (Book of Common Prayer) forms.

Lectio 365

www.24-7prayer.com/dailydevotional

Lectio 365 is a devotional resource that helps you pray the Bible every day, and is inspired by Lectio Divina – a method of Bible meditation that’s been used by Christians for centuries. Written by leaders from the 24-7 Prayer movement, and produced in partnership with CWR, this resource helps you engage with Scripture to inspire prayer.

BIOY

www.bibleinoneyear.org

With BIOY each day you receive a Psalm or Proverbs reading, a New Testament and an Old Testament reading. It also provides daily audio and written commentary to walk you through each day’s reading, to provide fresh understanding of the texts.

The Vine

The Vine Community is a simple and flexible framework for living out a Christian life; sometimes called a ‘rule of life’. This isn’t necessarily about doing something ‘extra’, but about giving yourself the space to be the person God has made, and to grow in your relationship with Him, with an active, practical response to the teachings of Jesus Christ. For more information: www.blackburn.anglican.org

Bible Podlets

www.bdeducation.org.uk/podcasts/bible-podlets

Bible Podlets is a Bible study and discussion podcast for primary aged children to do with adults. Each episode has fun games/activities, an engaging Bible reading in the form of a news story, and discussion, with places to pause and talk together about the topic. You can download discussion notes from the resources area of the site.

If you prefer a hard copy resource, Christian bookshops carry a large range of Bible reading material, from daily reading notes to study books on particular themes or books of the Bible.

In addition to these resources there will be regular Quiet Days and Retreats offered by Whalley Abbey: www.whalleyabbey.org



*All texts in this booklet are taken from the
New Revised Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated*

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