

There's still time to edit your order

A reflection given on the on the Second Sunday of Advent, 5th December 2021, by the Curate, the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in the Attended Communion Service.

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

I keep being sent reminders '*There's still time to edit your order,*' says my online delivery company for our Christmas food order. Having been forced weeks and weeks ago to pick my delivery slot and throw some vaguely appropriate things into the online shopping basket - getting the basics in there: Turkey, check; stuffing, check; Christmas pudding, check; and so on - I'm now getting frequent reminders that. 'Don't worry, there's still time to edit your order.' Now these reminders took on a whole new level this week when I received a reminder from another supermarket congratulating me on having made an online Christmas food order and then reminding me that there was still time to edit that order. Some mild panic ensued, given that I had no recollection of even placing an order with them. What random items that I put in this order, I wondered, only to be reassured after logging on that in fact, I had placed no Christmas food order with them and that it was too late to book one, even if I wanted to. Of course, at that point I then had to suppress the growing feelings of somehow missing out, of not having placed an order that I never even booked in the first place. Now, the problem with these email reminders '*There's still time to edit your order*' is that they carry both a bit of hope and, it seems to me, mild threat and challenge - what's wrong with my order, you start to think? You can still edit the order but if you don't, watch out - you'll be stuck with whatever you thought was a good idea at the time that you placed it. You'll be stuck with that Christmas pudding when you've since had a 'Mary Berry' moment and decided that you were going to make one; or you'll be stuck with that Turkey to feed four, when you now have eight people coming round. Beware! Alter your order before it's too late.

So what has this got to do with our two readings today? Well, you may have already started to recognise that these themes of hope and challenge are present in both. In our Old Testament reading from Malachi, there is the news of the coming of a messenger to prepare the way before the Lord, a prophecy of the arrival of someone just like John the Baptist. So this is clearly a message of hope, but there's challenge too: "*For he is like a refiner's fire and Fuller's soap.*"

There's work to be done; there's editing to be done; to be ready to walk the way of the one who is coming. Now Fuller's job was to cleanse and whiten cloth, to remove dirt and oil from the wool in order to make it pure white and ready to be used or dyed. To do that required Fuller's soap. Similarly, fire is used in the process of refining metals, especially precious metals. The metal is heated up until all the impurities, the dross, forms on the top of the molten metal and can be scooped off, leaving the purified metal behind. Both processes speak of perfecting that which was already there, making the good better and removing the bad - promise and challenge. ... *'There's still time to edit your order.'*

Similarly, our Gospel passage today talks of the arrival of John the Baptist into a context of Roman rule and Roman oppression; into the context of the established religious hierarchy, the priests and the appointed rulers; a context where the people of Israel felt yet again well and truly in exile. The lived experience of the Jews felt far from that of being in the promised Land, so the talk of the arrival of the Lord after years and years of waiting was most definitely a longed-for message of hope. However, there's challenge alongside: just as with the refiner's fire of Malachi, John comes proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism was at the heart of John's Ministry. Perhaps this was John's single most important act in preparing people and preparing Israel for the arrival of Jesus: preaching that change; that repentance; and that forgiveness was necessary - *'There's still time to edit your order.'* Yes, the promised order is coming, but you might like to think what you need to change before it does.

Now, you may have heard the expression 'God loves you just as you are, but God loves you too much to leave you just as you are.' Similarly, there are those two same messages of hope and challenge in that expression.

The good news that we remember and celebrate each time we share in Communion is that, in the words of one of our Eucharistic prayers, *'When we were still far off, you met us in your son and brought us home.'* We are accepted and loved despite our flaws, despite the things that we have done wrong. But the good news is also that we have time - *'There is still time to edit our order,'* so to speak.

Just as C.S. Lewis describes in his book *Mere Christianity*, *'Each day is an opportunity to become more like Christ.'* And as Paul says in *Philippians 3:12*, *"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own."*

A man was once asked what would be his idea of perfection in eternity in heaven. He was a keen fisherman, and he said that he thought it would be like an unending day's fishing in a perfect stream with a healthy catch. When he eventually died and reached the pearly gates, St. Peter duly handed him a fishing rod and a pair of waders and directed him towards the stream. He had a perfect day's fishing; caught an impressive catch; and returned to St. Peter and presented his spoils. "What will I do tomorrow?" he asked. "More fishing" Peter replied. And so it was: the next day he spent another full day fishing; he presented his catch and he asked, "what will I do tomorrow?" St. Peter replied, "Fishing." The man replied, "Look, to be sent out each day to fish, catch the fish, bring back the fish, only to be sent out the next day to catch more fish. This isn't my idea of heaven. This is my idea of hell." And of course, in some ways he was right- be very careful what you ask for. His asked for plan for eternity was devoid of relationship; of compassion; of love; of worship; so many things. Some have said that the time each of us has been given is a gift for us to use to work out what eternity should really look like, or to put it another way, eternity starts now.

So just as John the Baptist preached, let's use this season of Advent to receive once again the glorious and abundant message of hope that Jesus offers for each one of us individually and for the world.

But, let us also hear the challenge offered by Malachi's talk of the refiner's fire and Luke's call to prepare for the way of the Lord, to make his path straight - a challenge that we can hear today as calling us to cast off all that presents an obstacle or a stumbling block to following Jesus and becoming more like him.

In the words of my online supermarket:

"There's still time to edit your order!" .

Reading Texts

Malachi 3.1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. 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.

Luke 3.1-6

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler* of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler* of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler* of Abilene, 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4a s it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '