

## Study 2 – Partnership



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Sermon of Saint John the Baptist*, 1566

*'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me...'*  
(Malachi 3:1)

### a) God's Messenger

#### Malachi 3:1-4

Malachi, like Jeremiah, brings a challenging message to a people whose faith and lives did not meet God's expectations. They were meant to be a light to the nations and had fallen further and further away from their calling, breaking their covenant relationship with God in so many ways, including an 'anything is good enough' attitude to their offerings.

Malachi's message is that they must honour God properly in their worship and daily lives, and in this way the other nations will come to know the Lord as the great king. This is an uncomfortable read for those it is aimed at.

Yet, despite their failings, the people still longed for deliverance through the Messiah. The message in this well-used Advent passage is that God's messenger (personified in the New Testament as John the Baptist), will come to prepare the way for the Messiah. Now, that might offer a wonderful glimmer of hope for the people if the prophet hadn't added, 'But who can endure the day of his coming?'

There would be a time of judgement, a vindication for those who had held fast to their faith, and punishment for the wicked. But also a purification of the priesthood, so they might shine once again. In the first two verses we have a link between the first and second coming of Christ, the two advents.

## b) Partners in mission

### Philippians 1:3-11

The Philippian believers became both friends and financial supporters of Paul and his mission work, and this is reflected in his opening words. When he left Philippi previously (after persecution and imprisonment) and headed west to Thessalonica, they had more than once sent gifts to help him on the way.

As with Paul, the church in Philippi was experiencing opposition, and these opening words are full of encouragement and prayer. As well as friends, Paul sees them as his partners in mission, seeing God work through them and confident that this will continue right through to 'the day of Christ Jesus'. The message that Paul had preached in Philippi made plain

that Jesus was the Messiah and, although crucified, had risen from the dead and was present in and through his people by his Spirit, purifying and readying them for the day when he would return.

Paul talks of a partnership, and that involves sharing, which he acknowledges. It's a word which also describes our own faith journeys, as we are all partners in mission, partners in the love of Christ, defending the gospel against attack, living out our own faith in daily life, and encouraging and building up the faith of others.

## c) Preparing the way

### Luke 3:1-6

Luke brings to life the words of Malachi and Isaiah in the appearance of John the Baptist, preparing the way for the Messiah, and he puts a timestamp on it, both politically and within the priesthood. John was waiting patiently for that moment, when the word of God came to him in the wilderness!

The key words are Repent and Prepare.

When a king wanted to take a tour of his dominion, he would send a messenger ahead to alert people living along the route, and make any necessary arrangements, such as filling potholes in roads, arranging accommodation and all the other requirements

necessary so that a king and his entourage might have a successful trip. The importance of this in Isaiah's words is the removal of obstructions, so that nothing will stand in the way of God's purposes, and in the context of Luke's use of the passage, this is both a physical and spiritual journey. For many this would be a journey to the river to be baptised as a symbol of spiritual cleansing,



Anton Raphael Mengs, St John the Baptist in the Desert, c1780

At this time, baptism was mainly for gentile converts to Judaism, as the Jews had several ritual washings to cleanse themselves. Here, John includes the Jews within his call, suggesting that the baptism he speaks of is something different, and vital to their own individual journeys of faith.

## Traditions #2 The Jesse Tree

The concept of the Jesse Tree has its 'roots' in Isaiah 11:1-4 where we read, 'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit....' and is essentially a family tree with Jesse reclining at the base and Jesus and Mary at the top. Between the two are ornaments and symbols representing biblical characters growing out like branches from Jesse. The earliest known depiction of the Tree of Jesse in Christian art is nearly a thousand years old, found in an illustrated manuscript of the Gospels that dates from the year 1086 in Bohemia. Over time, the Jesse Tree was represented in a variety of mediums including stained glass, wood carvings and embroidery.

The Tree of Jesse is found in the art and architecture of some of the world's most famous churches, such as the Cathedrals of Chartres in France, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, Canterbury in England, and St. Mark's Basilica in Italy.

In later days people would personalise their Jesse Tree by placing items and symbols on it each day through December to illustrate the Christmas story.



The Tree of Jesse - The Queen Mary Psalter, 1310-1320, British Library

.....

## They say...

*'It was not suddenly and unannounced that Jesus came into the world. He came into a world that had been prepared for him. The whole Old Testament is the story of a special preparation ... . Only when all was ready, only in the fullness of his time, did Jesus come.'*  
(Phillips Brooks, *The Consolations of God: Great Sermons of Phillips Brooks*)