

John the Baptist

6 12 15

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power
and come among us,
and with great might succour us:
that whereas, through our sins and wickedness,
we are grievously hindered
in running the race set before us,
your bountiful grace and mercy
may speedily help and deliver us.

Our text may be found in Paul's Letter to the Philippians, chapter 1 and verse 10:
'so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.'

The second Sunday in Advent shifts our attention to John the Baptist. John, cousin of Jesus, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, forerunner, prophet of the Most High, a voice of one crying in the wilderness, going before the Lord to prepare his way. And Paul, in our text today, neatly sums up what John was trying to do for those who came out to hear him 'so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.'

To be pure and blameless is the Jewish ideal. **Pure** – that's what it means to be kosher, to keep a kosher kitchen: the food you eat is only that which is in itself pure, untainted, according to the laws laid down in Leviticus 11. **Blameless** –

that's what it means to be righteous, to live the good life informed by the 613 commandments written in the Torah so that Man may know what is right action, proper behaviour in the sight of the Lord.

In our Old Testament reading today from Malachi, the prophet couples together two powerful images to describe purity: 'For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap' (3 v2). 'A refiner's fire' would be used to heat up the newly mined ore in order to separate the impurities from gold or silver, producing pure silver or gold – twenty-four carat, the best, the highest quality. 'Fuller's soap' would be used to clean the wool, bleaching away, washing away any impurities that may have got mixed up with the material. Both images suggest what needs to happen before we are fit and proper persons to stand in the present of God and to be able to worship him. Malachi's promise 'and he will purify' is beautifully and effectively set to music by Handel in his oratorio, 'Messiah'.

In our Epistle today from Philippians, Paul writes of 'the harvest of righteousness'. It's a powerful image that neatly captures the reward that proper behaviour will bring. Jew and Christian alike share the idea that there is a right and proper way to behave, not least through putting into practice the ideas embodied in the Ten Commandments which Jesus neatly sums up as loving God and loving our neighbour as we love ourselves.

And to enable people to be pure and blameless is precisely what John has come to do in 'proclaiming the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.' Repentance is essentially a recognition of where we have fallen short, of how we

have failed to do what we ought to have done and genuinely to regret the error of our ways. Repentance is a change of mind – we now regret what we once thought was right and are sorry for what we now see we’ve done wrong. Psychologically unresolved guilt can poison our soul. But the baptism of repentance is an expression of what Malachi alludes to when he is speaking of a refiner’s fire or fuller’s soap – purification, washing away impurities. And that is what baptism is – a ritual bath, a mikvah, to cleanse us from what defiles us. Don’t you feel good in the morning after a shower and you’ve put on fresh clean clothes ? And spiritually speaking, that is just what baptism does – it expresses a right relationship with God our Father in which we his children are rendered pure and blameless in his sight.

Baptism is, therefore, a sign of God’s grace. Baptism is something that we all share as Christians. And may we all, as we prepare for Christmas, be in a right relationship with God our Father through the incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ, and through the presence of his Holy Spirit in our daily lives.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew’s, Dinard

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G: Sermons 33 : John the Baptist

