

Guidance

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79

I read recently about a hospital, where, in the corridors of the maternity wards, day or night, little chimes ring out, the first lilting phrase of the Brahms Lullaby. A baby is born. Staff and patients and visitors take note, even if subconsciously. A new life happens in the midst of a hospital where in other wards life struggles with death and disease and is not always triumphant. A baby is born. Chimes ring out. A sign to anyone who hears them that there is always hope for transformation, hope for new life, hope for a new beginning, hope to be shown a way forward, even in the midst of life's darkest struggles.ⁱ

Our readings today in this time of Advent seek to show us where guidance lies as we live our lives.

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Advent continues. We wait, we watch, we wonder, we question. Will we find peace in our own souls? Will we find peace on earth? Not just the absence of violence, but peace that passes understanding, peace that heals and makes whole, peace that ensures there will be no more hurting, hunger, hopelessness. How has God loved us? Does God still love us? What, in 2021, after the year we have been through, and the febrile state of national and international politics, does that even mean?

Elie Weisel, holocaust survivor, Jewish writer and Nobel Prize winner, recalls a childhood story. When he was a boy, his mother would greet him every day when he returned from school. Every day she would ask him the same question. She did not ask, "What did you do today?" or, "Whom did you talk to today?" or even, "What did you learn today?" She would ask, "Did you have a good question today?"ⁱⁱ

Our from Malachi asks these sorts of questions, hard questions in the in which he wrote, 400 years before the birth of Jesus. Two millennia later we live in a society that has similar hard times, and similar hard realities to acknowledge. Is it the case that we live casual lives, ignoring signs of

judgement around us? We accept lies as truth, exploit our neighbours, abuse the earth, and refuse God's justice and peace. We read of double standards about lockdown parties in Downing Street. We read of Western Governments stockpiling Covid vaccinations and are surprised a new variant emerges in vaccination-poor Africa. Children, women and men drown in the Channel, exploited by merciless traffickers, fleeing poverty and violence in their home countries, and being confronted by an apparent crisis in hospitality and compassion towards the vulnerable.

Huge questions about how the world is today, and how we respond to that world? Do we say the problems are too big for us, beyond our ability to resolve? Do we expect others to take on responsibility for making things right? Or, weak and small though we may feel, do we resolve somehow, singly and together, to play our part in righting some of the wrongs that continue around us? Asking for guidance, looking for achievable solutions, and making a difference.

It would be great to live in a world where lessons were learned from the problems that arise, and sometimes they are. But often the same mistakes are made over and over again. It seems like we never learn. Who can help us? Who will guide us?

Luke, in His gospel, points to help and guidance. This reading, known as the Benedictus, after the first word of its Latin translation, has the father of John the Baptist, a Jerusalem Temple priest called Zechariah, sing of peace coming after strife, mercy coming after judgement, and light coming after darkness. It points the people of faith to an extravagantly gracious God Who will send people, many people, down through the ages, who will say the hard things, the necessary things, the hopeful things, the encouraging things, that will jolt or nudge us into action.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, childless all their married lives, will have a child. Elizabeth, and Mary the mother of Jesus, are related. John the Baptist, and Jesus, will be two of the many people God will send to offer the guidance the world needed in those days, and still needs today. Having been struck mute at the news of his wife's pregnancy, after nine months of silence and isolation, Zechariah, whose name means, 'God remembered', sings of blessing. Who will this child be? What will this child be called? He will be called 'John', which can mean, 'God's gift, or, 'God is gracious.' He will be one of the ones who will call God's people back to God, and to remind them that wherever the people have been, whatever the people have done, God is still

there. John will be one who prepares the way for the coming Messiah: the bridge between the old ways and the new ways that Jesus will bring.

John the Baptist's personal message will be about the world's need, and our individual need, to turn around, and to turn away from the things that hold us back and hurt and harm. The old-fashioned word is 'repent'. To turn around, to turn away from, and also to turn towards.

I wonder if this is the guidance that you need to hear today. I know I do. But season of Advent, with its opportunities to reflect and wonder is not just about personal piety and purity. It's good to be in a right relationship with God and with the people around you, to be saved from the numerous ways we separate ourselves from God's love. But the song of Zechariah, his Benedictus, his blessing, is also about the transformation of communities, and the world. In God's promise, in God's world view, the actions of individuals, and communities, countries and the world, are inextricably woven together. We are the way we are because of the world we live in, and the world is the way it is because of the way we are. If we want to change the world, we need to change ourselves. When we change ourselves the world, the part of it in which we live, will change too.

Where do we see God guiding us in our times, calling us out of hopeless, barren futures and into telling and living and sharing God's good news? What surprising signs of hope have we seen in our lives, and in our church, community and world that have reminded us that it's not all hopeless yet? Who are the ordinary and faithful people who are being transformed each day because of their kindness, generosity, graciousness, gentleness?

Could it be the person sitting beside you? Could it be me? Could it be you? This, I believe, is the guidance God offers to us again and again.

In the fourth century a Syrian deacon named Ephrem wrote, "Though the Lord has established the signs of coming, the time of their fulfilment has not been plainly revealed. These signs have come and gone with a multiplicity of change; more than that, they are still present. The final coming is like the first."

God's guidance, God's pointing towards peace and hope and light come again and again, like the chimes in that maternity ward each time a new life happens, even amid the disease and the dying

in the other hospital wards. Ordinary people still sing for joy. God's transforming work still continues. God's guidance is still offered.

Are we looking? Are we listening? Are we responding?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Jane Anne Ferguson, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 1*, p27

ⁱⁱ Deborah A Block, *ibid*, p26