

Malachi 3:1-4

‘I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,’ says the Lord Almighty.

²But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. ⁸God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

⁵Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.

⁶And all people will see God’s salvation.”

Having seven people, and a dog and a cat living in the same house, things can get messy.

Having children in the house is a great excuse for why things get messy, but of course if we did not have children (for all that I complain about the mess that they make), I would probably keep about the same standards, and simply clean less frequently.

Every month I invite the ministry team to the Rectory for a meeting. The hour before that meeting is spent picking up the shoes in the hallway, clearing the kitchen table, washing up, vacuuming and so on. Now — is this about *shame* that we live in frequently messy conditions, or is it *respect* for the people coming? Is it a *lie*, a sort of untruth about the sort of person I am, *or*, by briefly tidying the house to the level I would prefer it to be, is this a sort of truthfulness about the person I would aspire to be? Or is this just Wood Allen levels of angst and self doubt?

Now, the truth is that, with all these meals and all these clothes to wash and all the shoes walking into and out of the house, things do get dirty, and we’re constantly cooking, washing up, washing clothes and drying them, and picking up rubbish and toys and so on. We do have standards. But when people come, we prefer to show the house at the best of the standards we reasonably operate in, rather than the worst. Most of you are the same, apart, perhaps, from the range of standards that you are comfortable living in.

In part this is important to us because it is more pleasant and calming to live in a clean, bright, organised space than a dirty and messy one. In part it is because we believe that cleanliness is next to Godliness.

Some of this is really important though. Food hygiene officers can visit commercial kitchens regularly to ensure that they are operating within authorised standards. If not, customers may get food poisoning. None of us wants that. So restaurants work with these standards to ensure that they are doing the right thing. They may dread the inspection, but they should value it too, as these inspections could tighten their standards, and prevent problems, which are going to get reported on google reviews and tripadvisor. The inspector is your friend.

The same is true of Ofsted inspections of schools, and parochial visitations of churches and so on — we dread the inspection, but we should sort of welcome them, because they help us to perform better.

Malachi 3 tells us that there will be a warning messenger, (clearly John the Baptist) *then* ‘the Lord you are seeking will come and be like fuller’s soap and a refiners fire’. Other passages about John the Baptist contain his warnings about the one who follows carrying his winnowing fork in hand, ready to sift the people. And all of this makes us worry. CS Lewis gets the tone right when he has all the creatures somewhat stiffen to attention when Aslan comes — they know he is good. But will he find *them* to be good?

John’s message is that he is coming, so get your house in order. John is there, like the ink in my diary warning me of a meeting at my house, to tell me to *do something*. You may take this with fear and trepidation, or you may perceive it as help, the way many dancers in Strictly Come Dancing welcome feedback, and aspiring musicians yearn for a masterclass with a great player. But this is your forewarning — the master is coming.

Now, given that our faith is deeply focused on the *love* of God for you and me, expressed through Jesus’s redemptive life, death and resurrection, you will understand that I think we should be in masterclass mode, and not panic stations. When Jesus came, he showed remarkably little judgment... for the judge of all. So let’s imagine his coming again, but perhaps in terms of a Spiritual MoT and not, I hope, in terms of ‘finding us out’.

So in this light, have a think: if you knew that Jesus were turning up at your house in two and a half weeks time, what would you do? Better still, let’s imagine that you had written to Jesus, *requesting* a mentoring session, or a masterclass, what would you do in preparation?

I had a think about this for myself, and decided that one of my weaknesses was how much I pray. Now, I reckon I do pray, but could I give a more deliberate chunk of time to prayer? Shouldn’t it be more? There are plenty of people that pray for an hour each day. I’m nowhere near.

Secondly, I thought about my materialism. I’m not much more materialistic than the next person, nor much less for that matter. But I think that Jesus might suggest wanting a bit less and giving a bit more. I think he would think that a better thing. A good test is if Jesus asked to borrow your bank card, would you let him?

Thirdly, it’s a well understood thing that people who are on their deathbeds, and know it, urgently seek to mend relationships before it is too late. They forgive grudges they have held for years. They seek forgiveness for the messes they have made. They tell people that they love them. And that’s what we’ll do if we’re expecting an audience with Jesus. We’ll work out our relationships — get real about our mess-ups. Seek forgiveness. Pay more attention to people and less to, well, other things.

If you’re having a meeting with a mentor, one of those things that might get discussed is whether, of all the things you could do, you are focussed on the right things. That’s not a matter of sin, but a matter of focus. Are you doing the stuff that is life-giving to you, because it

is good for others? Are you doing what you're good at? Are you doing the most important thing you can do with your talents?

My final question would be, if Jesus were ruling the world, and there were perfect justice and peace and equity, would you experience culture shock, or would you fit in?

The surprising answer to most of these questions is that you are already doing much of what you would plan to do! Many of us do have a greater spiritual focus during advent. Joining a group, or reading a book that is a study is one of many ways we do this. Attending extra services, such as carol services is another.

We become more generous — giving presents, but also giving more to charity.

We attend to relationships by seeing relatives, sending cards, having gatherings.

And we follow the Christmas celebrations by making new year's resolutions, reflecting on the year that has past, and sometimes deciding to give up an old thing and do a new thing.

The conclusion I'm coming to is that Jesus is coming, and we do not fear his judgement, but welcome his feedback, because we want to be the 'best version of ourselves', and worthy of being in his team. Many of our activities leading up to Christmas can help us in the process of getting ready for that appraisal meeting — for that masterclass with the ultimate judge.

Amen.