

The Messenger

A sermon given on Sunday 8th December 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Malachi 3:1-7*; **Luke 3:1-6**

[*Lectionary has Malachi 3:1-4]

Introduction: Don't shoot the messenger!

I'd like you to think back to a time when you had to convey an important message. Maybe it was some good news, or maybe some bad news, or an instruction that you knew would not be well received.

How did you feel about the task you had to perform? How was the message received? Were there any implications for you, good or bad, from being the messenger?

The Messenger

In our first reading we heard from the prophet Malachi. Malachi is not one of the best known prophets, and verses that have been read today may be the only ones you have heard. I wonder if anyone here knows what his name means? The Hebrew means *my messenger*. Not a bad name for a prophet, I think.

And Malachi's message includes an announcement that God is sending another messenger to prepare the way for him.

"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. (Malachi 3:1 NIV)

Malachi's message was about the need to reform the worship of the Temple, which was half-hearted and hypocritical, and it was also about the injustice and oppression that was going on in society. That's the bit that the lectionary misses out. But God isn't just interested in worship in church. He also cares just as passionately about people being abused and oppressed, which is what verses 5-7 are about. It was a hard-hitting message.

When Mark begins to write about John the Baptist in his gospel, he quotes from Malachi as well as using the quotation from Isaiah which Luke and Matthew also use. Today, we are thinking about John the Baptist, one of the greatest messengers of God. We will consider the *context* in which he lived, and the kind of *character* he had which enabled him to be an effective messenger of God. I think you'll find that what Luke tells us about John is highly relevant to our situation today.

Context

The year is 28 AD, the 15th year of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke mentions the Emperor and other regional rulers as well as the high priests in office. Luke has a clear sense of how important the events he describes are to the history of the world. Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke's quotation from Isaiah includes a few more verses, finishing with "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." "All flesh" is an Old Testament way of saying all humanity. John's message has to do with God's plan for the salvation of the whole world.

In this year, 28 AD, Luke tells us that

the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:2-3 NRSV)

Luke emphasises that John is on a mission. Mark and Matthew tell us that people from all Judea and Jerusalem went out to hear John; Luke tells us that John went out to speak to them. I wonder

which model of church you think we follow here at St Michael's – do we wait for people to come in to join us, or do we go out to meet them?

The answer to this question is important. It is not just about what we think our role is as a church; it is also about our analysis of the world around us and our understanding of the Christian message. Perhaps we think that the world around us is basically OK, and the Christian message isn't really going to make much of a difference to the people we work with, those whom we meet in the shops or who are members of our family. After all, we live in a pluralistic society: people are free to believe what they want, or nothing. Religious faith is a private matter, OK if you like that sort of thing, but keep it to yourself, out of the public arena.

Or perhaps, like many people in our country today, we realise that the world is not OK as it is. There are many similarities between the world of the Roman empire in 28 AD and our world today: a world dominated by a “Western” culture which celebrated pluralism, where hedonism was prevalent, where sex and violence were used as forms of entertainment, and where, in spite of a generally stable and peaceful political setup, revolution and violence were always threatening to erupt, especially in the Middle East, and where the lives of many were blighted by poverty, injustice and oppression. In our world today we face many challenges, not least of which is the impending catastrophe which climate change is threatening to bring on us.

The message that God wants to bring to our world, as he did to the world of 28 AD, is that it shouldn't be like this; and more than that, it doesn't need to be like this. John's message was that a better world was coming, but everyone needed to make radical changes in their lives to prepare for this. Those in authority didn't like John's message, and it cost him his life. He reminds me of a modern-day prophet who also called for change, changes in attitudes and changes in society, and it cost him his life too. He even quoted the very same verses from the prophecy of Isaiah. Do you remember these words from one of the most famous speeches of all time?

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."

Martin Luther King Jnr had the courage to speak a message that the world, especially his own country of the USA, urgently needed to hear.

Into the same world God sent his Son, who not only *brought* a message about coming back to God, but *was* the message – the Word of God incarnate.

And into our 21st Century world God sends ... who? The Archbishop of Canterbury? The Pope? The Church – which includes you and me. There is hope, but the world is not going to be fixed by God waving his magic wand. It needs each of us to do some self-examination, and make some changes, both in our relationship to God and in the way we live, in other words, repentance. But that's next week's theme.

And also, most importantly, the world needs a Saviour, the one for whom John the Baptist was preparing the way. And then it needs messengers who will bring the message of God's transforming love and power to the people of our generation. People who will go out to others with this message, not wait for others to come to us. Are you willing to be part of this mission in whatever way you can?

Character

God probably isn't asking you to preach on Sandhurst recreation ground (although if you think he is, please talk to me first!) He isn't expecting you to dress in camel's hair clothes or to eat locusts and wild honey (interestingly, Luke doesn't actually mention these things). But there are things about John the Baptist we could learn from, aspects of his character that made him and his message attractive to the people of his day. They are all qualities we could imitate, things which enabled him to be a messenger of God.

The first thing that strikes me is his *openness to God*. Luke has told us in chapter 1 about John's calling before his birth. John knew that God had a plan for his life, and he took time out to pray and listen to God. So he was ready when God spoke to him. If we really want to get closer to God, we don't need to go and live in the desert, but we can all pray. I know how easy it is to get distracted, and how easily prayer gets squeezed out. But if we really want to do something, we will find a way.

The second thing I noticed was John's *obedience*. God told him to go to the desert and he did. God told him to preach and he did. When you sense God wants you to do something, do you do it? Especially if it's not something that you want to do.

Thirdly, his *integrity*. I think this must have been a large part of his appeal. John was straight with people, and they knew he meant it, and he lived what he said. Do we do that? Or do we make excuses? Other people will see whether we are genuine, or whether we're playing a game at being religious or spiritual.

And finally, John was *courageous*. He didn't hold back from saying what he believed, and was willing to pay the price. He criticised the ruler Herod Antipas for taking his brother's wife, and as a consequence he was imprisoned and later executed.

Openness to God, obedience, integrity, courage. That was John the Baptist. And people respected him for it – even Herod. And if people respect *you*, they will respect your message.

God needs more people to be his representatives in the world. People who believe his message of restoration and reconciliation and who live it out. This Advent, let us take some time every day to reflect on where we are with God. Are we growing closer to him? Are we obedient to his will? Do our lives match what we say we believe? Are we willing to run the risk of receiving the disapproval, or mockery, of others for what we believe? Are we willing to speak?

People like John the Baptist, and Martin Luther King, change the world around them. By God's grace, so can we.

Let me finish by rewriting the opening words of Luke chapter 3:

In the year 2018, when Elizabeth the Second was Queen of the United Kingdom, Theresa May Prime Minister and Justin Welby Archbishop of Canterbury, the word of God came to the people of St Michael's church in Sandhurst, in the county of Berkshire.

What happens next is up to you and me.