

Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6; Luke 1:68-79

Jonathan – that’s my boy – landed the job of youth minister at the church at which he was doing his probationary year. This meant that they would be able to stay on in Inverness which was what they had been hoping for; but it did mean moving house. So on the ninth of November Joan and I took the train to Inverness to help with cleaning, decorating and moving furniture.

The decorating in particular was a bit of a messy job, and Jonathan and I would not have been popular had we just wiped our messy and dirty hands on the towels. So before heading down to the church for our unhealthy Lorne sausage rolls – but they were good – we had to scrub up thoroughly and then use the towels for drying.

We are followers of the living God who is sheer goodness and perfectly pure. Sometimes, in our everyday lives, we forget him or disobey him, we mess up, we become messy and dirty inside. But God is marvellously merciful. He wants to make us ready to worship him and live for him again. We often talk about God’s mercy ‘washing us clean’.

The different promises and warnings in the prophecy proclaimed by Malachi were meant to encourage the people of Malachi’s time to return to God and give up the wrong thoughts, the wrong words, the wrong behaviour and attitudes which were making them messy and dirty in God’s eyes. God’s message and his coming, which Malachi also foretells, will be ‘like strong soap in a washbasin’, getting people ready to obey and worship God again.

In the second of our Gospel passages we were introduced to John the Baptist and we heard about the work God had called John to do. He came to get people ready for God’s coming in Jesus, which Malachi and other prophets had foretold. John asked the people of his time, whoever they were, to get ready for God’s coming in Jesus by looking at their lives and thinking about how they were messing up by disobeying God. They needed to make a clear change. John knew that the one sent from God, Jesus, would give people God’s Holy Spirit, who would enable them to be made really clean and purified as if they had been washed by strong soap – made really clean and purified inside.

We're in the season of Advent and a lot of us are well ahead with our preparations for Christmas. But the season of Advent isn't a reminder to get ready for Christmas by planning the Christmas dinner, writing the Christmas cards, buying the Christmas presents, putting the Christmas tree up, hanging the decorations. It's about getting ready for Christmas by taking a really good and close look at our lives and by thinking about the mess and clutter in our lives – the thoughts, words, deeds and attitudes that block the way back to God; it's about getting ready for Christmas by saying to Jesus: "Lord, may your mercy wash us clean" and by asking him for the Holy Spirit who will make us really clean and purified inside; and it's about getting ready for Christmas by asking Jesus to pour his love and goodness into our lives and to reshape them from the inside out. In a nutshell, let's get ready for Christmas by – and I make no apologies for using this old fashioned word – repenting.

Then we will take proper aim and not miss Christmas! Then we will be on fire for the coming good news of Christmas! Then we will be ablaze with the expectation of new hope in our lives at Christmas!

So let's take and make the time to have our hearts and lives prepared for the coming of Jesus.