

**Brancepeth Sermon: Ordinary People**  
**Second Sunday of Advent: 9 December**  
**Mike Higton**

*Malachi 3:1–4*

*Philippians 1:3–11*

*Luke 3:1–6*

It is sometimes difficult, when preparing a sermon,  
to come up with a message  
that might work for the whole congregation.

And after struggling a bit with that during the week,  
I'm afraid that I have to frankly admit that I have failed.

So I have had to produce *two* different sermons,  
for two different groups,  
and hope that I could get through both in the time available.

So: here is the first sermon.

This one is for anyone in the congregation  
who is feeling tolerably confident and comfortable  
about how good a Christian they are;  
it's for anyone who knows that  
they measure up pretty well,  
and who would feel quite ready to meet Jesus  
if he were to walk through that door on Christmas morning.

In terms of our readings today,  
this sermon is for those for whom the idea  
of the coming of Jesus being like a refiner's fire  
holds no real terror, because – well –  
you are already pure, or at least pure *enough*.

My sermon for that first group goes like this.

That's *lovely*. I'm *so* pleased for you.

*Do* keep up the good work.

Amen.

So, that's the first sermon out of the way,  
and I can get on to the second.

Apologies to people from the first group  
who now have to sit through this one too.

Just let your minds wander,  
and it shouldn't be too painful.

This sermon is for the rest of us:  
the ones who are – frankly –  
rather mediocre Christians.

The ones who are,  
at least if we look at ourselves closely,  
somewhat disappointing and unimpressive.

Now, we unimpressive ones might be tempted  
to think that none of today's readings are for us.

We had the prophecy from Malachi to start with:

See I am sending my messenger

to prepare the way before me – and so on.

That reading was all about

those who can endure the day of the Lord's coming;

it's all about getting ready for the refiner's fire;

it's all about those who can

present their offerings to the Lord 'in righteousness'.

And we might think that that's not really us,

because we're just not that impressive –

but also because all this high drama,

all this definitive judgment,

all this high stakes, end-times excitement,

doesn't really seem have too much to do

with the ordinariness, the unimpressive normality

of our Christian existence.

Or we could turn to our Gospel reading from Luke,  
and to his portrait of John the Baptist.

Now, John the Baptist was someone who  
these days would get monitored by the security forces  
for fear he was radicalising  
the disaffected youth of Israel:  
he's clearly by polite modern standards an extremist,  
and he's equally clearly someone  
whose whole existence is a drama –  
and so he's someone who seems well fitted  
for words of stirring prophecy,  
like those of Malachi and Isaiah.

He's part of a messianic drama  
played out in the wilderness –  
and what does *that* kind of drama have to do  
with people as normal, as distinctly underwhelming,  
as all of *us*?

It's as if he's starring in Lawrence of Arabia,  
while we're starring in the Archers –  
and the Archers when it was still  
an everyday story of country folk, at that.

Or we could even look at our reading from Philippians,  
though this reading is admittedly rather different in feel.

This is Paul writing from prison  
to one of the churches in northern Greece –  
a church that he had helped to found,  
and with which he liked to keep in touch.

In his letter, he speaks of their lives  
involving 'overflowing love',  
he speaks of a 'harvest of righteousness',  
he speaks of constant prayer for one another,  
he speaks about people getting imprisoned  
for the sake of the gospel,

he speaks about repentance and salvation  
and the transformation of lives.

What has all that to do with Brancepeth,  
on a cold Sunday morning in December?

What does it have to do with you and me?

What does it have to do with someone who was  
writing this sermon while the biggest thing on his mind  
was how much the plumber

he had to call out yesterday might cost?

What does it have to do with people  
who live down here on the plains,  
away from the dramatic mountain tops  
of Christian experience?

Well: the answer is *everything*. It has *everything* to do  
with people like us.

Let's stick with this text from Philippians for a while.

Because we know quite a bit about the churches  
that Paul wrote to,

certainly enough to know that they weren't  
packed full of spiritual heroes.

They were actually packed full of the just the kind of  
unimpressive, rather ordinary people  
you can see in the chairs around you –  
and that you'll see if you pop to the bathroom  
and look in the mirror

We know that they were people who  
got on tolerably well some of the time,  
but we also know they were people who  
didn't find it very difficult to fall out.

We know that they were people who grumbled.

They grumbled about who it was  
who ended up doing all the work;  
they grumbled about the church members  
who they thought puts on airs and graces;  
they grumbled about catering, and about where  
the church catering supplies were being purchased;  
they grumbled about the collection,  
and where it was going,  
and whether it was sensible to send their funds off  
to prop up central church structures  
hundreds of miles away;  
they grumbled about how unimpressive  
the preaching could be,  
and how much they'd preferred the old guy;  
they grumbled about how long it was taking  
to get real leaders sent to them,

and how long they were having to make do  
with local people they knew all too well.

We know that they disagreed about  
how much their church should be  
standing up to the ways of the world,  
and about whether the church was  
being too permissive or  
whether it was being too puritanical;  
we know they argued about  
whether their services were too regimented  
or too chaotic.

They were, in other words, rather like us –  
if not actually somewhat worse.

*That* is the kind of church that Paul was writing to.

A church no more impressive, no more elevated,  
no more stacked with heroes and saints than ours.

Now look again at what he wrote to them.

He thanks God for *them* – for those ordinary,  
grumbling, disagreeing and disagreeable people.

He is confident about *them*, confident that they –  
with all their failings, all their inadequacies –  
‘share in the gospel’

He is *not* saying that he’s confident that they  
have somehow arrived,  
that they have their haloes already fixed in place,  
that they glow with an achieved righteousness.

No, he's not confident in them  
so much as confident in *God*,  
and confident that God has begun to work in them.

God has *begun* to work *on* them,  
God has *begun* to work *in* them,  
God has *begun* to work *through* them

And Paul is confident that God will carry on.

Nothing is finished.

Nothing about them is complete  
and impressive and established.

They are a work in progress –  
*very much* a work in progress.

But Paul has the spiritual insight to see that  
God has *begun*.

He sees that they have heard the good news about Jesus.

He sees that they have taken it in – to an extent.

He sees that they have accepted it – as best they can.

And he sees that they are beginning to live it –  
imperfectly, fallibly, often rather badly.

But Paul's confidence is in God, not in them.

And so he prays.

He prays for these ordinary,  
unimpressive, mediocre people

He prays that their love  
will overflow more and more to one another.

He prays that they will get better  
at discerning what each other needs.

He prays that they will learn to go further  
in caring for one another,  
learn to go further in looking out for one another.

He prays that they will learn to love each other  
as the ordinary, unheroic people they all are.

He prays that they will grow slowly in love,  
grow slowly in faith, and grow slowly in hope

And he trusts that, when Jesus comes,  
he will look at these ordinary people,  
people just like us, and will recognise his own,  
*not* because they've become perfect mirrors  
of his glory –

but because Jesus will see his own life  
planted in them, and growing.

He will see the beginnings of a love like his.

He will see the beginnings of a care like his.

He will see a seed beginning to grow in them,

beginning to bear fruit in them,

in the midst of their ordinary lives,

in the ways that all these ordinary people

behave towards one another.

Because however unimpressive, however ordinary,

however mediocre we think we are,

however unheroic and unsaintly, *we are his* –

and that is quite impressive enough for anyone.

So. It's advent.

Christmas is coming

Whatever else we are doing,

we should be getting ready to welcome Jesus.

We should be getting ready to welcome  
God's refining fire, blazing in an unimpressive manger.  
We should be getting ready to meet this Jesus again –  
getting ready in the only way there is, the only way we know,  
by letting his love grow in us.

So this is my Advent prayer:  
that your love, our love, our love for one another,  
our love for our family and friends,  
our love for our community,  
our love for the stranger in our midst  
and the stranger beyond our walls,  
the love that God has given us in Christ,  
the love that God has planted in us, our ordinary love,  
love lived out in ordinary lives, amongst ordinary people,  
may overflow more and more, to the glory of God.

Amen.