

---

# Hope that saves the Planet

*Temple Cowley URC, Dec 6th 2009*

*in which I argue that we are living through  
humanity's final 'Advent'.*

---

### ***Malachi 3 : 1 - 4***

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

### ***Luke 3:1-6***

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, 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, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness : 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"



We're hearing a lot about all the political events surrounding Copenhagen summit – events 'on earth'. But what is going on 'in heaven'? What does it mean, to talk about 'what is going on in heaven'? (After all, we're asked to pray that God's kingdom will come 'on earth as in heaven'?)

This heaven-talk is about the *real* forces that are driving change – what's really going on 'behind the scenes'.

- the real, hidden, physical forces that are causing global warming – which almost certainly includes human activity. But the processes are subtle, complex, hidden and (to us 'ordinary mortals') obscure. They can often only be talked about in the language of higher mathematics and statistics. These are 'heavenly' forces.

- the real motivational forces that are driving people and their leaders to act, or the forces which are hindering them, *stopping* them from acting. These are the spiritual forces that really do shape our world.

As regards the first, the scientists are our ‘priests’ here; they it is who discern the mystical processes of God’s Creation and God’s ‘Laws’ (of physics) and who interpret them to us. We are in their hands, their liturgy is in a foreign language as far as we are concerned – the language of higher mathematics. They’re the only ones that can ‘read’ the Creation in this way.

Are they squabbling, like the priests in the Jerusalem Temple squabbled amongst themselves (as the climate change sceptics argue)? Not really, I think. There are a couple of renegade ‘priests’, and there are some others deeply frustrated by them.

Why are they frustrated? So frustrated as to want to bar the dissidents from their meetings (that’s what the hacked emails are about). They’re frustrated because they know that *they* are not the ones with the power to do anything about it. They are merely priests, not kings. And they of all people know the urgency. They know that populations are resistant to change; people don’t want to have to face it, and will jump at excuses for inaction. These scientists know that it is the politicians who have to act if the crisis is to be averted. And they know that Western politicians need a strong mandate from the people to act, because a politician who’s been voted out of office cannot drive change. And if they can’t shut the dissidents up the politicians won’t get that mandate, and won’t act.

A quote :

“It is not the ecologists, engineers, economists or earth scientists who will save spaceship earth but the poets, priests, artists and philosophers.”

Lawrence Hamilton, *Operation Noah*

Why? Because these are the people that motivate, move, inspire change. These are the people who can persuade us that the changes we so dread need not be feared. Interesting, (isn’t it?) that the politicians are not included in that list . . . They should be . . . they should be.

Because what we need is political leadership that is :

- honest, rooted in the truth, sworn to speaking that truth ‘in season and out’ (as the New Testament has it)
- clear in its vision of what is needed, with a clear vision of a promised future
- unswerving in its drive towards that vision
- leadership that’s trustworthy, principled, incorruptible, that cannot be ‘bought’
- that is ‘winsome’. That is to say : attractive, charismatic, the sort of leader you’d want to follow.
- that is persuasive, inspiring, that makes people feel they are playing a positive part in creating a new world.

***The time is now, pressing, urgent. All of human history has been moving remorselessly towards this.*** Hasn’t it? All our carelessness with the planet, all our unintended sin. It’s all been leading us towards this final crisis of the human race. Leading towards the ‘Great Atonement’ that the people of Jesus’s day were expecting – the great settling of accounts. As one of the Christian Aid posters on the march yesterday said : “The end is nigh” – but it added a question mark.

***In short, in our hour of need, the hour of reckoning for the human race, we need a Messiah : that is, a truly God-anointed priest/king.***

Is God going to act to save his people? Or has God written us off? Has God finished with his human experiment; is he content to let us fell the last tree and let our grandchildren drown, freeze or roast to death? Has God transferred his affections to some better, more clued-up, spiritually aware species on some other planet; a species that (unlike ours) *knows* how to use its freedom?

Do we actually *want* to be saved? Are we actually *worth* saving?

These are the questions the prophets asked. These are the questions we need to be asking of ourselves and of our leaders.

But the ‘sin’ that separates us from God and God’s Creation cannot be spirited away with a ritual carried out by one man (a High Priest) in the confines of some Temple (from which ordinary mortals are banned), with mystic mumblings and obscuring clouds of incense in the dark. Nor will Satan be banished as easily as driving a scapegoat off into the wilderness.

No, mass repentance is needed. A baptism of repentance. A washing-away of age-old habits (of energy squandering) . . . a dying to them, and a rising-again to a different (carbon neutral) sort of life. Is that what was going on yesterday for us at ‘The Wave’ demonstration – a baptism of repentance? God’s people flocking out to the wildernesses of London and Glasgow asking “What must we do to be saved? Tell us, and we’ll do it!”

The advice John the Baptist gives them seems very tame : “Soldiers, don’t grumble about your pay and abuse your power to extort money from people.” A bit like : “well *you* know : stop travelling by air. Insulate your house . . .” (see Luke 3 : 9 - 15)

***Do you see? The Advent story is being acted out for real, now this weekend! It’s no fairy story, it’s not ancient history – it’s urgent and it’s for real.***

So what have the Christians to say? We ought to have something to say, for heaven’s sake – because we’ve been rehearsing this story every Advent for 2,000 years. Year after year we’ve told stories of a people’s longing for the true Messiah, and how the true Messiah came, and instead of being welcomed by the powers, was killed. But how his death changes everything. How, when we repent, we are baptised into his death and then, by the power of the Holy Spirit are empowered to live a different sort of life to God’s glory – given the words to say when the pressure is on, and the power to work miracles of healing. That’s the Christian story, isn’t it?

So is the love and the forgiveness of God only for life in some other, ‘spiritual’, world? Can we relax and do as we like, trusting that God will redeem us however much we continue in our sinful ways? Can we praise the Lord, work ourselves up into a breast-beating holy frenzy in what we imagine is the power of the Holy Spirit, and then after getting our spiritual ‘fix’ go out and drive home in a gas-guzzling car? Stopping by at MacDonalDs on the way? Is God *that* much of a soft touch? Will he beam us up out of it as long as we have faith in him? Is having an emotional spiritual experience God’s guarantee that our grandchildren will have a planet that sustains human life?

Or is it rather that God submits himself to our ignorance, self-delusion, self-centredness and sometimes sheer malice, and as he shoulders his cross, calls us to take up our cross and absorb the

punishment of world's sin along with him? And does God, in Jesus, warn us very clearly that it will get a lot, lot worse before it gets better (remember last week's reading?); but when it does, hold your head up because you know the hour of deliverance is at hand?

***What kind of hope, exactly, is this Advent hope?***

Let me tell you : whatever it is, it's a hope that produces repentance, action for change – self-sacrificial, non-violent action driven by love for God's world and God's people. If our hope doesn't produce repentance and change, it's not Advent hope – it's false optimism.

Advent hope works to prepare the world to meet God's future, trusting that God “does not desire the death of a sinner but repentance” (Ezekiel 18 : 23).

Advent hope is the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise. Repentance is the way we make straight the way for the Messiah. If we repent of our energy-hungry ways, if we make plain our willingness to accept a new way of life, even at the cost of self-sacrifice, God will indeed raise up the leadership we need to save us.

***Our repentance is the beginning of the story of God's salvation.*** Mass consumption in the Christmas spending spree is a funny way of showing that repentance.



