

Sunday 9th December 2012 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		2nd Sunday in Advent – Year C 16 days of activism for no violence against women & children (25th Nov – 10th Dec)
Mal 3:1-4 (Baruch 5:1-9)	Ps 126	Phil 1:3-11
		Luke 3:1-6
Prepare the way for the Lord		

It is with great pleasure that I announce the appointment of the Revd Mzinzi Dyantyi as our Sub-Dean. Mzi has been with us for the past two years; he has brought many gifts to the ministry of the Cathedral. We congratulate him very warmly indeed. He will be installed as Sub-Dean at the ordination service this coming Saturday, 15th December 2012.

“A voice cries in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord; clear a straight path for him. Every ravine shall be filled in, and every mountain and hill levelled; winding paths shall be straightened, and rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ” (Luke 3:4-6)

The streets of Grahamstown continue to be lined with the purple flowers of the jacaranda trees, purple for the season of Advent: purple as the colour for penitence, repentance, a change of heart and of life; purple as the colour for royalty as we prepare for the coming of the King.

We are in the season of Advent - a time to make ready, to prepare the way for the coming of Christ in his birth at Christmas, a time to prepare for the second coming of Christ as Lord and King at the end of time.

Church seasons and Advent

Why these different seasons in the church year?

Seasons mark the changes, the different rhythms of the year – spring, summer, autumn, winter. Heat and cold, growth and planting and harvest, colours, quiet, silence, rain and cold.

Our lives have their seasons, their predictable rhythms as well – birth and childhood, the teenage years, young adulthood; marriage and family for some; growing in maturity and wisdom with the advancing years.

And within these years of our lives, we have the other seasons – times, seasons, of joy and love; times, seasons, of grief and loss and sorrow; seasons which appear barren and empty and lifeless; seasons of suffering and pain; times, seasons, of energy and creativity, fulfilment and achievement.

The church year has its rhythms, its times, its seasons as well, its different emphases – Easter, with its life and light and joy and resurrection; Advent and Christmas as seasons of hope and new beginnings, birth, new life; Holy Week and Good Friday as a season of suffering and pain; All Saints and All Souls Days as a time of grieving and remembering and giving thanks; and the green season, the Sundays after Pentecost, the season of growth and fruit.

These seasons help us put our own experiences of light and joy, and suffering and heartache and loss, alongside the bigger picture of how God continues to reveal himself to us. As we do this, we become more aware of God's presence in our lives. We begin to hear and discern what God is asking of us, or leading us into, or offering us.

Advent is one of these special seasons in the church year.

These weeks of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany are known as The Season of Incarnation. In the Incarnation, God became flesh, took on human form, and dwelt among us.

“Advent” means “coming” or “arrival”. It is a season of waiting and hope and expectation, knowing and praying that Christ will come among us, that Jesus will be born in our lives, that God will be with us in the coming year.

Advent holds together the tension between our present reality and our future hope. It is like looking into a mirror and seeing what we look like now, and catching a glimpse of what we shall look like one day – not old and tired, but changed, transformed, made new.

The emphasis last Sunday was on Advent as a time to wait; a time to look back; a time to hope.

Certainly we look back with thanksgiving for the blessings of this past year, but also with sadness, during these weeks of goodbyes to those who are moving on to the next phase in their lives – Andy Kruger and Heather; Sinovuyo Vena (one of our young lay ministers); a number of our graduating students; our COTT student placement team.

It is a time to look back as we come to the end of the year. We may be ragged and worn out and shattered after a tough time in our lives; there have been some sad events, deeply disturbing, for us as a nation; people are tired, rung out, drained.

It is a time of waiting. There can be the rather powerless waiting for others to do something, for others to decide – waiting to see what will come out of the ANC’s Mangaung conference next weekend; waiting for the global economy to recover, waiting for those in authority to act.

But there is the waiting in expectation, waiting in trust, for God to move. The Advent waiting is that sort of waiting: resting, waiting for new strength and direction from God. It is a time to look forward in hope, to see what next year will bring for us as the Cathedral community – new faces, we hope; new opportunities for ministry and witness and outreach; waiting to see what God will do; believing and

trusting and knowing that God will do something new, that doors will open and new possibilities will emerge.

Today, as we wait, the Advent call is to prepare the way.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist stands in the line of the Old Testament prophets. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Malachi spoke of the messenger who would be sent by God to prepare the way for the day of the Lord's coming. The prophets looked forward to the time when God would send the king, born in David's line, who would set Israel free.

John was such a prophet. He came to prepare the way, to point others to Jesus. On seeing Jesus, he said to those around him, "Behold the Lamb of God." (Jn 1:35) He was to say of Jesus, "He must increase, and I must decrease." Like John, we are to point others to Jesus, to enable people to open their hearts and lives to accept and follow Jesus Christ.

He challenged the people of Israel to behave with justice, to care for the poor; he called on those with power not to abuse their authority.

He is a foretaste of the church as the prophetic voice, the prophetic community, a community called and sent by God to prepare the way for Christ to come into hearts and lives, to speak the word of God to the powerful, to be the voice of the voiceless, to speak truth to power.

John the Baptist exercised his ministry at a particular time in the history of the nation and in the history of the world, surrounded by powerful rulers, people of power – "In the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius... during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas..." (Luke 3:1-2) – the word of God came to John. The action of God, God's revelation, came to John and to the people of God at that time in their history, at a time when those in authority were cruel

and corrupt and power-hungry. We can expect the word of God to come to us now, to speak to us now, here in SA, in Grahamstown, December 2012. God gave a word for that time; God gives a word for our time.

The word of God came to John in the wilderness – the place where Israel had journeyed with God, been shaped by God, the place where the people of Israel had been closest to God, during their forty-year journey from Egypt to the Promised Land; the place of manna and quails and water from the rock, which God had provided. The wilderness was the time when God had led the people with the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day – when they had known the constant presence of God, when they had learned to trust in him for everything, when they had learned to follow as he had guided them. It was where they had received the covenant, the law, become a nation, had been shaped as the people of God.

We need this wilderness space, this wilderness experience. It is hard to hear God's voice, God's word, in the midst of the clutter and the busy-ness of our lives. That is why we are here today, why we draw aside to church for worship, to clear our hearts and minds, to be still, to listen. This time of worship is our wilderness, the place of manna and quails, fire and cloud, the presence of God. We return to the wilderness each Sunday. Advent is our wilderness season, a time to return to the wilderness, go back to our roots, back to the familiar stories of our faith, to remember what God has done, what God calls us to be and to do.

But the wilderness has another meaning. The wilderness is the place of drought, of dryness, almost of desert – the place where nothing is growing, nothing is happening. It becomes the place, the time of waiting for God to speak, for God to do a new thing, for God to bring the rain and the growth, the healing – in our lives, in our work, in the mission and life of the church, in our community. If we are in a wilderness place now – that is the place to wait expectantly for God to speak.

The word of God came to transform, and the word of God comes to us this Advent, to transform. The word from John: repent. Turn from all that is wrong. Receive God's forgiveness and new life. Let today be a new day.

Prepare the way

So let's prepare the way for the coming of Christ, for the coming of the kingdom of God. Sweep out the rubbish. Get rid of the obstacles, the things that are destructive. Do a spring-clean, a spiritual preparation for Christmas, for the coming of Christ. We live with potholes and broken pipes in Grahamstown. What are the potholes, the things that cause damage, in our lives? The attitudes? The behaviour? What are the broken pipes in our lives? The things that block the flow of living water? The things that prevent us from making peace? From being reconciled? The resentments and anger that prevent forgiveness? Ask God to do a new work in us – to straighten the crooked paths. Wait. Ask. Expect.

Many feel a deep dissatisfaction with how things are in our community. There is outrage, pain, sorrow, despair. Violence against women and children; poor governance; a deeply divided community; our education authorities and many of our schools in disarray. It is appalling that the average for Maths in Grade 9 in the Eastern Cape is between 12% and 13%.¹

We offer all these things, these deep concerns, to God and ask God to speak to us, to use us, to take our energy and our concern so that like John we may be movers and shakers, those who challenge and disturb the powerful, and upset the status quo. Let's prepare the way for the coming of Christ.

¹ *The Times*, 4th December 2012

John was an alternative figure, dressed simply, eating very simply, not depending on wealth or power to make his mark. Let's prepare the way for the coming of Christ by putting our trust in God and in God's power, not in the usual power of the world. We have seen the failure of politicians to bring about real change, the change of hearts and communities – it is time for us to point to God as the one who transforms.

CONCLUSION

We have in front of us the Advent wreath with its circle of greenery representing new life, and the never-ending mercy of God; the four outer candles of Hope, Love, Joy and Peace; and the fifth candle, the Christ Candle.

... a reminder that we are surrounded by hope, love, joy and peace... and at the centre, the heart of it all, in our midst, is Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless and strengthen us in our life and our journey as God's beloved children, in all that lies ahead.