



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

**Readings:** Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

**Advent II**

*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*

Philippians 1.6

I am grateful that life is not about treading water. How good that we continue to learn.

I think that in every church post I have left, I have thanked the people for helping me cut my ministerial teeth, just as you all do, for there is always something new to learn, some life-giving change to embrace. Only this year I have enjoyed several firsts: not least, involvement in the baptism of a believer by total immersion.

Similarly, use of the computer is a constant adventure of discovery. Even I, more at home with a fountain pen as I am, learn something every week. So, I now know that in the world of IT phishing and chips are little to do with salt and vinegar, and that debugging is not what the 'nit nurse' used to do searching our hair for lice when I was at Primary School.

The Christian life is not about treading water, either. Three characters remind us of that this morning.

### **Zechariah**

At the end of the service, we will sing that song, *Benedictus*, attributed by St Luke to Zechariah, father of John the Baptist. It comes to us as the old man's response to the unexpected news that after years without any children he and Elizabeth are to become parents. I confess that the nocturnal attention to a mewling infant is something I am glad to have left behind, but this priest of God murmurs a poem of praise. Instead of resenting God's intrusion into his sedentary senior years, Zechariah senses that he and his wife have become caught up in God's way of looking favourably on his people. 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel', he proclaims. 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us.' Clearly, he's up for something new!

### **Paul**

St Paul is no different. Writing from prison, to the embryonic church at Philippi, he recognises that he is on a spiritual journey. He's not arrived. He's determined to keep pressing on, 'straining forward to what lies ahead'. There is something deeply reassuring there, is there not? As we move through the ages and stages of life, is there one of us who thinks we have scaled the mountain of discipleship and reached a summit of perfection? Of course not. We are pilgrims, with a vision that drives us onwards. Sometimes we're compelled. Sometimes we're complacent. Sometimes we're entirely off piste. But God remains faithful to that covenant to be our God, even when we need re-booting as God's people. And the journey is until we die: 'for me to live is Christ', says Paul, 'but to die is gain.'

### **Jess**

And Jess, too, is on the great trek that is the Christian life. That Autumn night in Manchester in 1990 was momentous. It was momentous in part because we'd brought Jess 6000 miles to England for Baptism so that her grandparents could be present. Imagine the disappointment then, when my father and mother missed it due to a traffic jam on their 200-mile drive from Surrey. But it was really momentous because Jess' Baptism as an infant marked the start of her formation as a child of God. Using that analogy of a journey, baptism isn't arrival but departure; it is the setting-off point. She grew up in the church, chided by older members for running down the aisle, teased by the church secretary for wearing odd socks, but steadfastly embraced as one who belonged to the fellowship. The journey continued as she read the Bible beside Bethan and me, and at 8 years old wanting to know how we can possibly know what Jesus actually said, yet ready to explore it, interrogate it, and let it speak to her. Working in a secular environment she's gently but insistently held to her faith. Today the winding path that is discipleship brings her here, enabling each of us to sing with her, 'Be thou my vision, naught be all else to me save that thou art.'

## All of us

And so it is for all of us who travel in the footsteps of Zechariah and Paul, and accompanying Jess. Our church membership, our participation in the Gospel, as churches and as individuals, is not a single moment; it's a gradual and lifelong process. Moreover, as each of our trio acknowledges in their diverse ways, it is not our own doing. It is God's work in us. And the on-going nature of this journey is richly summed up in our text, as Paul's incarceration leaves him not despairing or defeated, but hopeful: '*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*' I was impressed recently, listening to Terry Waite reflect upon his own five-year detention in Beirut. There, he was often in solitary confinement, with nothing to read, yet one senses he was buoyed by the same mind that was in Zechariah and Paul, able in the most dense of shadowlands to trust the everlasting covenant by which God gives light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and that one day God would bring things to completion, just as indeed happened thirty years ago on 18<sup>th</sup> November.

Last week, we pondered Advent's forward-looking perspective, with an eye to what the Bible calls the end times. We recognised that 'the end' can refer not only to a final time when everything is finished, but also to the achievement of God's purpose, God's victory over all that robs us of life in all its fulness. And God's unrelenting determination to fulfil that purpose is seen in the words of the prophets we read – like Jeremiah last week, and Malachi this, as well as in those exquisite narratives that punctuate the Church's year: accounts of the living, dying and rising of Christ. You see, at the incarnation, God's love is made *real*, on the cross, God's love is found to be *reliable*, and at the empty tomb God's love is found to be *resilient*.

Such is grace and truth, because of which we can trust that the good work begun in us will be brought to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. And until then, may we, walking in the light of God, be held by faith, hope and love every step of the way. Amen

N. P. Uden

5<sup>th</sup> December 2021