

Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 3: 1-6

December 9th 2018

Malachi's fiery message.

In some ways this is the week of Advent that we could do without. You could be forgiven for feeling that our readings this week just do not fit. In fact, worse than that, they are a bit of an embarrassment – and we might even prefer it if people who are not accustomed to darkening the door of a church did not decide to do so today. Why? Well, because to many people this season is all about peace, goodwill and love - but we turn to our texts for this morning and what do we find? Well, it's all about sin and judgement.

For a start there is John the Baptist, that weirdo out there in the desert – he's not exactly a party animal. We are told that he is proclaiming 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...' Hmm. Repentance, forgiveness, sin. Is this really what we want to hear about in 'the festive season'? We thought Christmas was about a baby, a manger, a donkey – not some crazy prophet haranguing us about sin. And if we'd read on further in Luke chapter 3 we would have heard John warning that the one who is coming, the one whose way he is preparing, will baptize with fire, a fire that never goes out. In other words, 'turn or burn!' - that seems to be the gist of John's message and there's nothing very Christmassy about that. I trust that you won't get too many Christmas cards with that message!

Then we turn to the Old Testament book of Malachi and things aren't much better there. We don't know much about Malachi. The word means 'messenger' so we don't even know if this is somebody's name, or what. But whoever the author is they are not exactly a barrel of laughs. The book is set about 400 BC when the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon and they had rebuilt their ruined temple. Things should have been going swimmingly, but you know how it is sometimes when you have really looked forward to something and there's such a sense of anti-climax? Well, that's how it was for the Jews. Life back home was a let-down. The new temple that they'd built wasn't a patch on the old one, and although the Babylonians were long gone the Jews still weren't free from foreign control, and they still didn't have a king, and there were ominous stirrings on the international scene as military powers squared up to one another ... and so on. And people were disgruntled with God. The future they thought they had been promised had not materialised, and resentment against God is clear in the first verses of our

reading. ‘How have we wearied God?’, people are asking: ‘what have we done wrong?’ Evil seems to be triumphing - where is the God of justice? But that sense of grievance, the accusations are not just from Israel’s side. God has grievances too. Elsewhere in the book God complains that there is wickedness and injustice in the life of the nation. There is oppression directed at the poor and the vulnerable. And the unrighteousness in the social fabric is reflected in Israel’s worship which has become half-hearted and paltry. Malachi complains further on that people are not giving generously, they are skimping on their offerings, and the priests are offering polluted food and tainted sacrifices, and God is grieved.

So I guess these people could do with a bit of festive cheering up. I imagine they could do with a bit of peace and goodwill on earth. Well, if so - tough. God has issues too. And the message of Malachi is that God is coming, God’s messenger is coming, and this is certainly not a comforting, welcome prospect. There isn’t much good cheer here. God is coming, but ‘who can endure the day of his coming?’ God is coming, but ‘Who can stand firm when he appears? He is like a refiner’s fire, like fuller’s soap.’ God is coming, but this is no easy, consumer-friendly God dispensing cheap comfort. It, too, sounds more like ‘turn or burn’.

Now, there are two, related things that strike me about this passage. The first is the importance of worship in the life of God’s people. Much of Malachi is directed against the priesthood and the tawdry liturgical life of the people: i.e. it’s worship. And maybe that is a reminder that this is the primary vocation of the people of God. And of course worship includes the way we live our daily lives – the practices of obedience to God and justice and neighbourliness and generosity: all those areas where the people of Malachi’s day were failing. But all those practical ways of living faithfully to God are gathered up in our worship routine when we gather together as the people of God and we praise the Lord as we do here this morning. Never forget the description of God’s people Israel given then by God was ‘a priestly kingdom’. And that means that Israel was called to be the place where worship is offered up on behalf of the world, where God is acclaimed and proclaimed over every other god or lord, and where the sins of the world are confessed, and where the praises of God resound. And that is our calling as the new Israel, the church: and it includes the worship of God in lives lived faithfully and justly – but it also means gathering together and lifting up our voices in song, and raising prayers for the

world, and breaking bread together and celebrating God's presence amongst us. God yearns for worship from his people, not because he's ego-centred and self-preoccupied but because worship is about the meeting of two parties in love and affirmation, and God blesses us in our gathering just as we bless God. And I want to be careful in saying this, but at times the church is in danger of putting the emphasis of our witness on good works and fighting for justice and right, but forgetting that our primary vocation is priestly – to be a priestly kingdom, characterised above all by worship – and it's from worship that our lives spill over into changing the world. And that is why it matters that time and effort is put into our music and our prayer and preaching and teaching and Sunday School and Junior Church, because it is all part of our priestly vocation as God's people. And heaven forbid that we become casual and indifferent as in Malachi's day.

But one other feature of this passage that we must address is the language of judgement and fire: 'who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and fullers' soap'. And here we meet that part of Christian faith that we might prefer to avoid – the language of hellfire and damnation. It is sometimes observed that the church no longer preaches and warns about hell, and that is because mostly we prefer not to believe in it. We prefer to focus on God's love and grace. Well, this is a big subject but I would contend that there is a justified reluctance to talk about hell because of misunderstandings and distortions that have traditionally owed more to medieval torture chambers than to the Biblical witness. So let me just make a couple of points.

Firstly, I would suggest that it is wrong to set God's love in opposition to God's fiery judgement. God's love is easily sentimentalised and tamed, but God's is a fierce love, a fiery love whose intensity is like a flame, but this is a flame that purifies. This is a refiner's fire and therefore it is not God coming at us with a flame-thrower. This is not an angry God despatching miserable sinners to the fires of hell. This is Malachi's God whose fierce, fiery love comes to burn away all the chaff, all the rubbish, all the dross that has no real place in our lives, so as to set us free to be our true selves. After all, what is it that is being purified and refined here in Malachi? It is gold and silver: 'he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi an refine them like gold and silver...'. And gold and silver are precious metals and God refines us because we are so precious and valuable in his sight and

God wants us to be free from all that taints and pollutes our lives, the impurity and the dross!

So let me put it like this: the only part of me that God will ever burn away is what is really not me at all. The only part of me that God will ever destroy is that which clings to my life like a parasite, pervading my life like a cancer and violating who I truly am. This is God's purifying love. It's God's fierce, searing love that has created me and made me for his own glory and that will not be satisfied with anything less. It's a fiery love that will never be satisfied with that old, false self who masquerades as me far too much of the time but which is not really me at all. And the good news is that old, false self has been crucified with Christ and put to death in baptism, and baptism acts like Malachi's fullers' soap – washing me clean so that my new, cleansed and purified self might emerge and shine like precious gold and silver. And the Christian life is one in which I become that new self, that true self, that new person. I am called now to live out that new identity, leaving the old dross behind. And I know that it doesn't necessarily fit squarely with all the proof texts, but if there is a hell then maybe it is the place of unfinished business, that fiery place of all-consuming love where Christ still has work to do. Perhaps hell is that place where the fire of his love must continue its work on human souls until they are finally purged and purified, and they bow the knee to Jesus, so that they may at last be released into eternal life – and yes, that includes even the Hitlers and the Stalins of this world. Anything else, surely, is a denial of God's enduring faithfulness and love towards his beloved image-bearers. And please God, not more torment. Not endless suffering. Don't we get enough of that here in this life?

Our verses from Malachi end with the words, 'Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord...' That was Malachi's vision and it is a vision for the church of Jesus Christ, and for me and you. We are in the hands of God. We are in the clutches of fierce and fiery love. May God refine and purify us so that one day your life and mine may be just that – an offering of worship, pleasing to the Lord. Amen, and to God be glory forever. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
we praise you, eternal one,
who in the beginning spoke
and brought all things into being;
and we praise you, God, faithful one,
who spoke to us through the prophets of old,
calling your people back to faithfulness and obedience;
and we praise you God, unsettling one,
who spoke to us through John the Baptist,
a voice crying in the wilderness,
a voice calling us to renewed faithfulness,
a voice calling us to prepare the way for the coming
of God's anointed one.

O God open our lives to John's message of repentance.

Open our hearts to confess our sins and wrongdoings.

Open our spirits to receive your Holy Spirit

who comes as a fire to purge us of our guilt,

to cleanse and to purify us,

and to empower us to lead new lives.

Come to us here we pray

and make us true children of Abraham,

and true brothers and sisters of our Lord

and Saviour Jesus Christ,

in whose words we pray together, saying...