

“THE MESSAGE OF MALACHI”

Malachi 1:1-14

There’s a brand of margarine – or similar yellowish concoction of chemicals for spreading on your bread – called *I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter*. It looks like butter: it smells vaguely like butter: it’s on sale near the butter in the supermarket: and it’s presumably supposed to taste like butter. But it isn’t. Close enough, in many ways, but not the real thing. This last book of The Minor Prophets which we’re looking at this morning – last in the Old Testament and last in the series – could be subtitled *I Can’t Believe It’s Not Worship*.

The people of Israel have returned from exile in Babylon. After years away from their homeland, away from the centre of their religious life, away from their flocks and fields, away from the heritage of their land, they have returned to Jerusalem and to the surrounding villages. Of course, it’s all in ruins. Much of it was damaged when the invaders arrived many years before and in the intervening years neglect and looting by surrounding tribes – not least of them Edom, the descendants of Esau – have left the Temple and the walls of the Holy City a heap of rubble.

As we’ve heard in this series, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah encourage the people with their preaching and the Temple is rebuilt under the governorship of Zerubbabel. By 516 BC it’s complete and around sixty years later Ezra the priest and several thousand more Jews are allowed to return to Jerusalem. You can read in the books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* about the ways in which the city was restored, social reform was initiated and worship began again with a renewed sense of vision and purpose.

But it wasn’t long before things started to slip again. The people ignored God’s laws and neglected their worship. Their allegiance to the One True God became nominal and easy-going. They went through the motions of worship and kept the laws that weren’t too demanding, but, by and large, they forgot about God. They got on and followed the patterns and traditions of worship, but they couldn’t remember why.

And into this situation comes the prophet Malachi. He was pretty well contemporary with Nehemiah and followed on soon after Haggai and Zechariah (whom we’ve already mentioned). The name Malachi actually means “My Messenger” and may well be a *nom de plume*. And the message he brings from God is a powerful one. It’s clear and straightforward and delivered in a very distinctive style. Almost all of it is spoken as a word directly from God, in the first person. This is a very different, far more penetrating message than the “blessed thoughts” that you hear today paraded as prophetic utterances in prayer meetings and Bible conventions. These are nice little “pictures” saying how much the Father loves his little lambs or whatever, but searing words of judgement on a people who have neglected their God.

There's quite a bit of sort of question and answer stuff here. And as God begins to chide his people for their lack of authentic worship, as he tells them that they not really worshipping him at all, the people respond, "*I can't believe it's not worship*". Look, we're doing all the right things. We're saying the right words in the right order. We're making our sacrifices by killing and burning animals as we've been told. What's not worship about that?

So Malachi forces the people to take a good look at their commitment to God and the way that's expressed in their worship. He tells them how the priesthood have led the people astray by their own example and their own laxity. He accuses them of doing the very minimum in their worship and in their daily observance of God's laws – and that bare minimum is unsatisfactory because of their attitudes and their approach. He points out how their giving to God is no longer a grateful offering of the best, but a reluctant parting with the very fag ends of their material goods. And the core of this book, the most chilling words you'll find here, are in 1:8: "*Try offering that to your governor! Would he be pleased with you?*" Some of you may remember we did a whole series on this book about nine years ago entitled "*What would your boss say?*" – how would your boss at work (or your teachers or your tutors at college or whatever) react if you treated him as you treat God? Often our commitment to our job, career, family, leisure pursuits far outweighs our commitment to God and that is displayed in the way we approach worship. Much of this prophecy is a criticism of worship that is **Superficial, Substandard** and **Slothful**.

1. SUPERFICIAL

Basically, God is saying through his prophet, that what you're doing actually costs you nothing – you're making no real effort and that's just sneering at God, doing even less than the minimum. The sacrifices of the people of Israel were just the dregs, really, the things they didn't want and couldn't sell anyway. Look at 1:8,13. It wasn't honouring to God at all. Their worship was no more than putting out the rubbish. It was about them, not about God. It was about making themselves feel good, about what they were getting out of it. In some ways that's exacerbated by our living in a culture that is heavily consumerist, but it's also part of our fallen human nature that we put ourselves first.

The American preacher Adam Dooley, in a sermon entitled "*It's Not About You*", wrote these words:

We would never be guilty of making worship more about ourselves than about God, would we? How many times have you left a worship service only to complain, "I didn't get anything out of it today!"? We make statements that are saturated with self as if worship is all about us:

Why can't we sing more of the songs I like?

I don't think the preacher should talk about this or that!

I can't believe so-and-so didn't talk to me today!

No-one ever notice what I do in church.

*Here's the problem: worship isn't about **getting** anything; it's about **giving** everything to God. That all makes us idle judges of activity rather than active participants in adoration of a holy God. Christian consumerism defines the quality of our worship ... God is disgusted with our obvious worship of and preoccupation with ourselves.*

Ask yourself about your attitude to God and to worshipping him. Do you take it seriously? Is there any effort involved? What about your offering – is it the first thing you set aside from your income or what's left over after you've done everything else? What about your time with God – is it time set apart for him in advance, programmed into your day, or is it a few moments when you crawl exhausted into bed at night? What about your gifts and talents – do you want to sue them for the good of the Kingdom of God or are you content just to sit here for an hour or so on Sundays and let everyone else get on with the work? What about your attitude to coming here – do you try to get here on time and ensure that this time with God in the presence of your brothers and sisters in Christ is something special, or is it a question of just turning up as close as you can to the start time and getting away as quick as you can afterwards? Apply God's reasoning to that and ask yourself how your boss would respond if you treated him with the same contempt. Basically, is your Christianity real – deep and important – or is it superficial. Because that will be obvious in your worship.

2. SUBSTANDARD

Malachi's hearers did their duty as far as going up to the Temple was concerned. It was the least they could do – and they did it! But God was fed up with it, and he told them so (2:17). There was still a lot of sin hanging around and God wanted it rooted out – it was affecting their worship. How could they pledge their allegiance to him, tell him how much they loved him, thank him for his goodness – all the things that they did through the words and rituals of their worship – when as soon as they left the Temple, as soon as the worship was over, they simply carried on as before? How can we say the things we do here – in prayer, in song, simply by our being here – if there's no sign of being part of our lives the rest of the week? That is substandard worship, substandard Christianity.

In 3:5, God tells the people what the problems are:

Sorcery – horoscopes, mediums, the kind of stuff that seems pretty harmless until you're involved, and then it's too late.

Adultery – sex outside marriage (or in someone else's) and, as Jesus pointed out, lust (*Matthew 5:27-30*).

Liars – gossips, rumourmongers, sensationalists

Cheats – those who defraud people, fare-dodgers, shoplifters

Oppressors – those who contribute to injustice by their economic activity, those whose desire for cheap stuff here enslaves the people who produce it elsewhere

Racists – depriving aliens of justice.

And look at 2:11: God is talking here not only about marriage, but also about the adopting of other belief systems, that “syncretistic” religion we mentioned a couple of weeks ago – mixing up your belief in Jesus Christ with all kinds of other ideas and philosophies. If you are still knowingly and habitually sinning – if you are still doing things that you will not give up even though you know they’re wrong, then your Christianity and your worship will be substandard.

3. SLOTHFUL

The people of Malachi’s day were saying “*What a burden!*” (1:13) and “*It is futile to serve God*” (3:14). Basically, they couldn’t be bothered. Everything was too much trouble. They wanted an easy life: yes, God had got them back to their homeland again, but now they were there they didn’t really want him interfering with their lives too much.

Isn’t that the attitude we often adopt? No, I can’t be bothered, really: I’ve done it for so long and it doesn’t seem to have brought me all the blessings I wanted, so that’s it. So long as it doesn’t interfere with my time, my leisure pursuits, my friendships, my overtime, my television programmes, fair enough – but I’m not going beyond that. No-one who really cares about their beliefs would ever say that. I remember reading a book by Douglas Hyde (I think it was) called *I Believed*. It was about his journey from being a committed communist to a committed Christian. Having spent years trying to convince people of the truth of Marxism and pouring all his energies into spreading the message, he couldn’t initially believe that Christians were prepared to put so little into what they believed.

If you are saying that God is not worth the effort, that you can’t really be bothered, then your Christianity is slothful and that will be shown in your worship. But we still come along and say “I can’t believe it’s not worship!” We are singing the latest songs. We’re doing the things we heard about at Spring Harvest or Soul Survivor. We’re following the trail blazed by this worship guru or that famous preacher. Why’s that not worship? And God says, “Look at your attitude. Ask yourself why you’re doing it all.”

But part of the problem is just what we have done this morning. We’ve started in the wrong place. We’ve started by looking at ourselves and – even though we may feel we have been saying the right things to ourselves – that’s not where we should begin. So much of our Christianity – in practice, in belief and in worship – begins with us. We talk about what we want to do, what’s in it for us, where we might have failed, what we can do for God. But did you notice where Malachi began, what were God’s

first words to his people, through his prophet. It's an astoundingly simple, yet overwhelmingly and infinitely deep opening sentence. These are the first words of this oracle. Before all the proclamation of the failing of his people, before any words of judgement are uttered, we read, "*I have loved you, says the LORD.*"

That's where Malachi begins. That's where we begin. We are dealing with a God of love – a God who had led and sustained Israel through centuries of wanderings, war and woe, a God who had given so much in so many ways, a God who had given of himself to such an amazing extent to protect the people whom he loved. We are dealing with a God who drew up in eternity a plan of redemption for his creation, who sent his Son into our world to endure humiliation and suffering for us, who forgives again and again and again the sins of his followers, a God who cares for, who has compassion on, who suffers with his people.

That's why he's so saddened at the attitude of those who profess to follow him. He has given himself completely for us. He has, as the old hymn puts it, "*emptied himself of all but love*". And having done that, he has to watch while those who say they have committed their lives to him seem to demonstrate that they have, in reality, committed their lives to their company, their family, their bank, their sports club, their on-line shopping account. So let's just look at a couple of ways in which God says, through Malachi, that he has shown his love – two ways which will, I hope, inspire us in our worship of and commitment to him – his **Choice** and his **Changelessness**.

1. CHOICE

When God declares his love for his people, they respond with a question. It's not clear whether these are actual responses, whether they are anticipated or whether they may even be the cries of Malachi's hecklers. If it's supposed to be God speaking, then the first is the most likely. He can see that they are asking themselves, "OK. So what's God done for me, then? Where's the proof of this love?"

The people of Israel asked the question and God responded by pointing out what had happened to Edom. As we've said, they were the descendants of Esau and, you may be aware, God chose Esau's brother Jacob to be the means by which he fulfilled his promise to humanity, the father of his chosen people Israel. What he's saying, in effect, is "Look, I chose you and kept you. If I hadn't chosen you, you would have gone the way of Edom. Yes, you've felt my wrath, but I have restored you. Edom felt my wrath and has been destroyed."

This is none other than the sovereign choice of God. It's something I can't say I fully understand – and I don't really think anyone else does either – but however much we grapple with it, it is clearly taught in the Bible. God has chosen those who he knows will respond to his offer of life to be saved – and that includes you and me. The New Testament is shot through with this idea and we – like Israel in Old Testament times – are *“a chosen people ... a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).*

“How has God loved us?” He has chosen us and set his seal on us. He has sent his Son to die for us as proof of his love. He stands by us in our humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. He promises us a place in heaven at the end of this life. The love of God is written on every page of his word, and we are the recipients of that love. If you are a Christian, who has at some stage responded to the call of God and taken the step of committing your life to him – however that commitment was expressed at the time – you need never ask the question *“How has God loved us?”* It is obvious by his choice. He has called you to be a part of his people and promised you not only liberation from the grip of sin in this life but guaranteed an eternal future with him when this life is over.

2. CHANGELESSNESS

That's all very well, until we start to compare God's love with our own love – our love for him and our love for each other. However much you love someone else, there are times when that love goes up and times when it goes down. Sometimes it is overwhelming and you feel you're going to burst with the sheer power of it all. Other times you are so cool towards that other person that you wonder just what it was all about. There are times when you feel so close to God that your whole life seems to have been changed irrevocably. And at other times you can't even bring yourself to pray to him. Human love is so fickle – and the verb I've used several times there sums it all up – it to do with **feeling**.

But God doesn't **feel** love. God **IS** love! And his love doesn't change because God doesn't change. He states that in another very simple sentence in 3:6: *“I the LORD do not change.”* His love continues for all time – and looking back over the history of God's people only goes to prove that. Since God made his covenant with Abraham and his promises to Jacob he has never once deserted them. Sure, they have been through difficult times, but that's because they have turned away from God, not because he has let them down.

Even their recent experience in returning from exile has shown yet again that God has not forgotten them. Their whole system of worship is built on the premise that God has watched over them with his loving

care throughout history. That's why he is so upset that they fail to recognise what it's all about and fail to express their thanks in what they do. And it's no less true for us as God's people today. God never lets us go, and he never will. Sure, things go wrong. Sometimes that's a result of our wrong choices, but God can bring good out of even those situations. Sometimes it's a result of the fact that we are still living in a fallen world and we cannot be protected from everything that happens around us without God interfering with the free will of men and women originally made in his image.

Of course, there's a direct corollary to this idea of God's love being changeless and that is that his judgment is changeless as well. The last few sentences of the prophecy communicate that very clearly. Chapter 4 begins with the word "*Surely*", and God's words about his changeless love must apply to his judgement too. As we have said many times before, God's saving love makes no sense without God's judgement. But the underlying point here is that, for those who are his people, God's love is shown in his constancy and faithfulness.

You see, it's only when we begin to become fully aware of just how great God's love is that we can really begin to serve him – and to worship him – properly. That's why this little book begins with such a clear statement about God's love, why there is that sense of reassurance right at the very beginning. And once we begin to appreciate that, our worship will become more authentic, more appropriate to a God whose love is infinite and eternal.