

Second Sunday of Advent 2024

Malachi 3:1-4

We don't know much about the prophet Malachi. We don't even know that there *was* a prophet Malachi: the word simply means 'God's message', and it may be that it was simply given to the words of someone with an entirely different name. As for when it dates from, who knows? The best guess, from the sorts of things the prophet speaks about, sometime between five hundred and three hundred years before Jesus.

What is he writing about? He's writing to a people who long for God to do something. Who are fed up with all the evil in the world, who are fed with up with being on the losing side, who have had enough of the wicked with all their swagger, all their pride. Come on God, they say, show yourself. Bring justice, bring peace. Bring down the mighty from their thrones, raise up the humble and meek.

And the prophet's message, essentially, is 'be careful what you wish for'. The Lord who 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? You? What makes you so sure that when God turns up, as He will, that his business is going to be them over there – the ones you resent, the ones you call wicked. What makes you think, people of God, that his business will not be, first of all, with *you*?

For he is like a refiner's fire, and fuller's soap, and he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi. Well, that's a way of talking about the Jewish priesthood. Malachi, whoever Malachi was, is saying that it is God's own priests that need sorted out, God's own Temple, God's own people. When God turns up, it will not be – or it will certainly not *only* be to sort out the wicked outsiders. He turns up to burn away the dross of his own people, to cleanse his own people. If they're looking for the world to change, they need first to look in the mirror.

And the reading goes on, sadly beyond what we read this morning, to spell out what cleansing his people, burning away the dross, means. What God wants, he says, is people who look after the poor, the weak. People who care for the bereaved. People who welcome the alien and the stranger. People who are faithful to their marriage vows. People who in all their conduct show that they revere the Lord who made them. Insofar as God's people don't look like that ... well, change is coming. And the change, whilst wonderful, whilst needed, will feel like burning fire, as all their selfishness, laziness, corruption is scorched away.

I don't think that message needs very much translation to apply pretty directly to us.

We have a great tendency to think of religion as a kind of consolation. Something that gives comfort, that reassures us that things are OK. Think of the number of sermons you've heard that emphasise that God loves you, that He welcomes all :despite their frailty, despite their mistakes. That there's no-one, no-one, he wouldn't want to share in his blessing. That you cannot begin to imagine the length, breadth, height, depth of his love for each one of us.

Those sermons are right. I have preached a good many of them, so they'd better be right. But on the other hand, they are not the full truth. The prophet Malachi – and he's not an isolated voice in the Bible – would also say this. God loves you too much to leave you as you are. His love doesn't just accept you, no – it's going to grab you, sweep you up, lift you out of yourself, take you from the mess you have made to the glory you were made for. The Gospel is not, you don't have to change, he loves you anyway. The Gospel is that *because* He loves you, you will be changed in ways you cannot begin to imagine.

And much of that will feel like refiner's fire. It will feel painful, being made clean, having the corrupt bits burned out, being made what God wants us to be. It will involve changing things we didn't think *had* to change. And again, those missing verses at the end tell us in what areas those things are likely to be: sexual faithfulness; straightforward honesty; giving workers their fair wages; protecting those who cannot defend themselves; caring for the alien and the stranger among us. Does your life look like it is about those things? I think we all know our record is, to say the best, patchy.

The risk of this kind of sermon is that it ends up just shouting at people, so that you just go away with the message 'try harder, be better'. And in fairness, that is what the prophets spend quite a lot of time saying. It's not entirely wrong to say that yes, a lot of this does come down to trying harder: to moral decisions, to conscious effort to change your life, and our collective social life.

However, the prophets are not the Gospel, and a Christian sermon has to do a bit more than just shout at people to behave. The Gospel is not, *behave*. The Gospel is that a great change is coming, indeed that a great change has begun to come – that it began in Bethlehem, that it burst into life in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, that it is flowing into each of us now, as we pray, as we receive the sacrament, as we daily ask Jesus to be more and more in us. A great change is coming: those are the tidings of comfort and joy. All that Malachi asks us to remember is that part of the comfort is that that great change is not just for the world, it is for us. And it will probably be much more than we have bargained for.

Amen.