

### *Refined and purified – Malachi 3:1-4*

Our Old Testament reading today is from Malachi, the last book of our Old Testament and one of the minor prophets. Now I should point out that the term ‘minor prophet’ doesn’t mean some sort of lesser prophet, the term relates simply to the length of the books.

The longer books – the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah – are the major prophets, and traditionally in Jewish synagogues, each book would be one scroll.

By contrast, the minor prophets are very short. In my bible, the whole of Malachi takes up less than three pages. All of the minor prophets together – from Hosea though to Malachi, take up 58 pages. Whereas Isaiah is 68 pages and Jeremiah 65.

So the minor prophets aren’t less important, they’re just shorter, and in the old days, they used to all share a scroll.

Because they’re shorter, we tend not to read them much. Some are better known than others; Micah is probably best known. He’s the only minor prophet to get a look in among our standard Christmas readings – he’s the one that Herod’s advisors consulted to determine that the messiah would be born in Bethlehem – and he also famously gives us that verse which appears so often on church signs: “[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8)

Our lectionary gives us readings from the minor prophets in Advent this year, and I thought it would be good to look at Malachi today, Zephaniah on the second Sunday in Advent, and Micah on the fourth Sunday – the third Sunday in Advent will be our Christmas Carol service.

So Malachi is one of the minor prophets, and is most famous for being the last book of the Old Testament.

Malachi is thought to have been written in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, at the time when the Jewish people who had been captives in Babylon had returned to Israel. It was a tough time for the people.

They looked forward to what they called ‘the Day of the Lord’ - the time that God would raise up a messiah who would bring in a new era and restore the

nation of Israel to its former glory. The Day of the Lord would bring justice for the people of God, and all the wrong things would be swept away.

Except... well, what if they were some of the wrong things?

It might be a bit like calling the council to complain about your next-door neighbour's pergola, and when the council ranger comes out to investigate, he notices the granny flat that you've built under your house without council consent...

Judgement sounds great doesn't it? Except when you're the one being judged.

Through Malachi, God was warning the people, that the Day of the Lord was coming. He said, "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple".

My first job was as trainee accountant at Australian National Industries head office – it was a huge organisation, there were thousands of employees across more than 50 locations, and the corporate structure was complex web of about a hundred interrelated companies. Not long after I started, we were notified of an audit by the Australian Tax Office. We had, I think, three months to get things ready, which included providing office space for up to five ATO staff for 12 – 18 months with free access to all our records.

The senior staff got pretty frantic in the lead up to the auditors' arrival. Records were retrieved and sorted. Indexes prepared. Diary notes compared. Lists were made of things we couldn't find, and one of the early meetings with the auditors was the Managing Director, the Company Secretary, the chief accountant and the corporate counsel, going in and effectively putting up their hands and saying, "This is what we've done wrong... what do we have to do to make it right?"

It seemed to work amicably, but the process was still going on, with the auditors in residence two years later when I moved on.

I don't know if you've subject to a tax audit – and I trust if you have it wasn't quite as thorough as ANI's was – but when that happens, if there is anything wrong, it's going to come out.

And so, it pays to be ready for it. To have your records in order. To have your house in order. To admit your mistakes and be prepared to do what it takes to put things right.

The people of Israel were warned. Not only was the Day of the Lord coming, but there would be a further warning – a messenger – before it actually happened.

When John the Baptist began preaching – more than four hundred years after Malachi... The people it seems remembered this and other prophecies, because when John appeared, they knew their long-awaited messiah wouldn't be far behind. So they flocked to hear him... but then they seem to have lost track of what was supposed to happen.

They didn't understand it all properly. They should have been warned but they didn't get it. Malachi had warned them "Who can endure the day of his coming," he'd asked them, "and who can stand when he appears?"

In our bible study group this week we talked about the fear of God. The reading from Isaiah 11 told us that the messiah's delight shall be in the fear of God, and we pondered how we could delight in the fear of God.

In our discussion we thought that it wasn't fear in terms of being terrified or scared or afraid, but more about awe. Realising how great and mighty and powerful God is, and how we are insignificant by comparison.

I think that's what Malachi is saying when he asks "who can stand when he appears?"

We will all be in awe.

And I think the right response is to acknowledge that, to acknowledge we are not worthy to be with God, to be with Jesus, and yet, by his grace, that's what Jesus does for us – we become, through what he has done, the children of God.

We can get used to the warm and fuzzy image of God coming to earth at Christmas. The baby Jesus in the manger. Peace on earth, goodwill to all people, and so on. But there is another side to God arriving in history. God not just visiting, but intervening in the world. I think of it like this: Things can't be made right, unless something is done about what is wrong.

If we want God to put things right in the world, we need to understand that God is going to do something about what is wrong in the world.

And not only that: if you want God to put things right in your life, you need to let God do something about what is wrong in your life.

“For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap” says Malachi, “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness”.

So apparently, silversmiths would refine silver by putting it in a crucible in the hottest part of the fire, and they would effectively burn off any impurities, and then they would take the crucible out of the fire and pour out the pure silver.

This prophecy of Malachi has a parallel prophecy in just a few pages further on in the bible in Matthew’s gospel, when John the Baptist says of Jesus, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The fire in both cases gets rid of what is bad – the impurities in the silver or the waste of the grain harvest.

There’s a story of a woman asking a silversmith how he knows when the silver is purified, and the silversmith tells her “When I see my reflection in it”. And so it is with us: As we are changed by God, God is reflected in our lives.

Christians often say that God accepts us as we are, and that’s true, but it’s better put as ‘God accepts us, despite who we are’. God meets us wherever we are, whatever we’re doing, but God isn’t content to leave us there. God wants us to change for the better.

Malachi talks specifically about the descendants of Levi being refined so that they can present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. The descendants of Levi, the Levites, were the priests. They were the ones authorised to make sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. But by Malachi’s time, they weren’t doing a good job. He doesn’t tell us exactly what was wrong, but we can guess. They may have been skimming a bit off the sacrifices for themselves, they may have been taking advantage of their position, they may have been becoming full of their own importance, they may have become complacent and done a half-hearted job, or simply neglected their job.

They’d become, if you like, impure. Their conduct needed to be refined. To be washed. They needed to be refined, and they needed to be washed. And indeed, when John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, he offered a symbolic washing, not just to the priests but to the whole nation. That takes

place only a few pages later in our bible, but, in fact, it was really nearly four and a half centuries later.

Malachi assures his readers, his listeners, that things will be put right. Verse 4 tells us “the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.”

You want God to come and rescue you? Malachi effectively asked Israel, “He will. But you’d better be prepared. You need to be refined. You need to lose the impurities, all the wrongdoing. Starting with your priests”.

Of course, it wasn’t just the priests that needed refining or washing, ultimately, it was everyone. Listen to verse 5, immediately after today’s reading, as Malachi tells us who God’s judgement will fall upon:

“So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,” says the Lord Almighty.”

So not just the priests, but everyone.

The priests. The Israelites. All people. Us.

We can’t do it ourselves. We need help. We need Jesus.

To leap forward from the end of the Old Testament to the end of the New, in Revelation 7, John witnessed “...a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne... robed in white” (Rev 7:9), and then John spoke to one of the elders who said to him “These are those who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb”.

You might know the old hymn which asks “Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?” These days, we tend to shy away from that sort of imagery, but the washing we need to purify us is washing in the blood of the lamb – the blood of Jesus.

Because the blood that Jesus shed when he was crucified was poured out for us. Poured out to purify us. Poured out to pay the price of our sin. Poured out to wash us clean.

When we celebrate Holy Communion, as we drink we remember Jesus words “This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many”.

Of course, it's not blood. Nothing magical or supernatural happens to it. It's just juice. But it reminds us of Jesus' blood. And it's given to each one of us, so we're reminded that he bled – and died – for each one of us, not because of anything we did, but because he loved us.

So Malachi was warning the people of Israel 2500 odd years ago... but history shows us that most of the people of his time didn't listen.

And then 500 odd years later, John the Baptist warned the people. But again... most of them didn't respond.

And the warning comes to all of us today. And our experience shows us that most people still don't respond.

Our challenge is not simply to listen to the warning, but to respond to it. To admit what's wrong with our lives and our society, and seek God's forgiveness – forgiveness which is guaranteed by Jesus' death on the cross. And then, our response needs to go beyond simply accepting that forgiveness – we need to be open to being changed. To live our lives the way God wants us to live.

Each one of us, and all of us together: Refined and purified.

To the glory of God.

Amen.