

ST PETER & ST PAUL. 10TH DEC. 06 8.00AM AND 10.00AM

MALACHI

OUR FATHER, WE PRAY THAT YOUR WORD TO US THIS MORNING MAY BE INTERESTING, MAY BE UNDERSTANDABLE, MAY TOUCH OUR CONSCIENCES, MAY CHANGE OUR LIVES, IN JESUS NAME. AMEN

WE OFTEN TALK ABOUT FAMOUS LAST WORDS. SOMETIMES RATHER CYNICALLY: "I'M FEELING JUST A LITTLE BIT BETTER TODAY" -FAMOUS LAST WORDS! DO YOU LISTEN TO 'QUOTE, UNQUOTE ' ON THE RADIO? THEY OFTEN HAVE A VERY FUNNY ROUND ON LAST WORDS.

YOU WILL HAVE SOME IN YOUR MIND NO DOUBT. A FEW DAYS AGO MY MOTHER AND SAID THE SAME LAST WORDS TOGETHER THAT SHE SAID WITH HER OWN MOTHER MANY, MANY YEARS AGO. 'VIEL LIEBE, VIEL LIEBE' IT FELT LIKE A LIFE SUMMED UP -A LIFE FILLED WITH LOVE.

LAST WORDS HAVE A SPECIAL SORT OF SOLEMNITY AND IMPORTANCE - AND NOWHERE MORE SO THAN HERE AT THE VERY END OF THE OLD TESTAMENT -THE BOOK OF MALACHI. IT'S AS IF GOD SAYS, "HERE IS MY FINAL ANALYSIS, MY FINAL COMMAND AND ENCOURAGEMENT."

IT IS AN EASY BOOK TO FIND. YOU SIMPLY GO TO MATTHEW -THE FIRST BOOK OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND TURN BACK A PAGE AND THERE IS MALACHI -WHICH IS SIGNIFICANT BECAUSE NOTHING MORE STANDS BETWEEN THESE PEOPLE AND THE COMING OF CHRIST.

SO...NOT A BAD SPOT FOR AN ADVENT SERMON.

THERE WAS ANOTHER 400 YEARS OF HUMAN HISTORY BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS, BUT NO MORE PROPHECY, NO MORE SCRIPTURE, NO FURTHER WORD FROM GOD. THERE IS A KIND OF HUSH TO HERALD IN THE GREATEST OF ALL EVENTS, THE COMING OF THE SON OF GOD.

AND IT BECOMES ALL THE MORE SIGNIFICANT WHEN YOU CONSIDER NOT JUST THE FINAL WORDS OF GOD, BUT THE ACTUAL FINAL WORD ITSELF -DO YOU KNOW IT WITHOUT LOOKING FOR IT?

THE LAST WORD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT IS 'CURSE'

TO AVOID THIS WHEN MALACHI IS READ IN THE SYNAGOGUE EVEN TODAY, AFTER THEY HAVE READ THE FINAL VERSE 6, THEY REPEAT VERSE 5 TO AVOID HAVING TO END WITH THAT AWFUL WORD 'CURSE'

BUT OF COURSE THAT IS AN EVASION. THE TRUTH IS THAT ONLY JESUS CHRIST, THE FULFILMENT OF ALL THE PROPHETS AND ALL THE OLD TESTAMENT; ONLY HE IS GOING TO LIFT THAT CURSE.

WE REALLY DON'T WANT TO USE WORDS LIKE 'CURSE' ABOUT THE HUMAN CONDITION DO WE -SO LOOK AT IT THIS WAY.

THE OLD TESTAMENT ENDS WITH THE HUMAN CONDITION WITHOUT CHRIST -AND IT IS NOT GOOD NEWS.

HOPE IS CLEARLY THERE IN THE TEXT -'THE SON OF RIGHTEOUSNESS SHALL RISE WITH HEALING IN HIS WINGS' -AND IN A WAY THAT IS WHERE WE ARE AT DURING ADVENT. AN EXAMINATION OF THE HUMAN CONDITION WITHOUT CHRIST -SERIOUSLY BAD, PAINFUL NEWS, AND ALONG SIDE THAT THE REAL HOPE OF HIS COMING.

SO THIS BOOK MALACHI -IS THE LAST BOOK BEFORE JESUS COMES. IS IT WORTH READING? ARE THERE STILL INSIGHTS CONTAINED IN IT, WHICH HAVE MEANING FOR OUR LIVES TODAY?

WELL -LETS START WITH THE NAME. MALACHI SIMPLY MEANS 'MY MESSENGER' OR 'MY ANGEL' -SINCE ANGEL MEANS MESSENGER. IT IS UNLIKELY THAT THIS WAS THE PROPER NAME OF THE AUTHOR AND THE MAJORITY OF SCHOLARS SAY THE BOOK IS ANONYMOUS. THE AUTHOR DIDN'T WANT HIS NAME OR PERSONALITY TO INTRUDE; HE IS SIMPLY GOD'S MESSENGER. OUR GOSPEL READING WAS ALL ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST -SAME STORY -IT'S NOT ABOUT ME, IT'S ABOUT CHRIST.

JUST THINK ABOUT WHEN MALACHI WAS WRITTEN.

BY THE TIME OF THIS MAN THE TEMPLE HAD LONG SINCE BEEN REBUILT AND BEEN IN OPERATION, AND WE ARE INTO THE PERIOD WHEN NEHEMIAH RETURNED -MALACHI IS ASSOCIATED WITH HIS REFORMS.

THE DATE OF THIS BOOK IS ABOUT 450 BC. PARALLEL IT IN HISTORY, IT WAS THE TIME OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF GREEK CIVILISATION SO THE GREAT PHILOSOPHER SOCRATES WAS ON AT THIS TIME, ARTISTS,

PLAYWRIGHTS, THE PARTHENON IN ATHENS WAS BEING BUILT, ROME HAD JUST BECOME A REPUBLIC AND WAS BEGINNING TO FORMULATE ITS LAWS, THE PERSIAN EMPIRE WAS STILL A MAJOR POWER UNDER ARTAXERXES BUT WAS ON THE DECLINE -IT WAS A CRITICAL PERIOD IN THE HISTORY OF THE WESTERN WORLD.

MEANWHILE IN ISRAEL MALACHI BRING THE LAST WORD TO THE NATION BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF JESUS.

NOW JUST A WORD ABOUT THE STATE OF THE NATION AT THAT TIME. YOU MAY WELL CHOOSE TO SEE A PARALLEL WITH TODAY. THE JEWS HAD RETURNED FROM EXILE WITH HIGH HOPES. THEY REBUILT THE TEMPLE -IT DIDN'T HAVE THE GLORY OF THE ORIGINAL OF COURSE, BUT IT SERVED.

THE YEARS PASSED -AND GRADUALLY THE JEWS BECAME DISILLUSIONED. LIFE WAS VERY HARD. THEY SUFFERED FROM DROUGHTS AND BAD HARVESTS. THEY WERE SURROUNDED BY ENEMIES AND ALL THE PROMISED PROSPERITY, ALL THEIR DREAMS, FAILED TO MATERIALISE.

AND IT GOT THEM DOWN -SOUND FAMILIAR? -A SPIRIT OF DOUBT AND HOPELESSNESS.

THIS MOOD GAVE RISE TO THE QUESTIONS THAT FILL THIS BOOK. THERE ARE EIGHT OF THEM -QUESTIONS THAT WE CAN RECOGNISE FROM OUR OWN TIMES OF DISILLUSIONMENT. QUESTIONS SUCH AS: "DOES GOD IN FACT LOVE US?" IS THERE ANY REAL POINT IN WORSHIPPING GOD?' 'IS GOD ACTUALLY A GOD OF JUSTICE?' "DOES HE PUNISH EVIL?' 'IS THERE ANY FUTURE FOR US?'

YOU CAN BOIL IT ALL DOWN TO JUST TWO BASIC QUESTIONS:

"IS IT ALL TRUE?'

"IS IT ALL WORTH IT?'

PRETTY BASIC QUESTIONS -QUESTIONS THAT CREEP UP ON US WHEN WE ARE TIRED AND BATTERED BY LIFE'S PROBLEMS. A LITTLE VOICE AT THE BACK OF OUR MIND CHIPS IN WHEN OUR HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS TAKE A KNOCK: 'IS IT ALL TRUE?' 'IS IT ALL WORTH IT?'

IN A WAY THIS LITTLE BOOK ANSWERS THESE QUESTIONS RIGHT AT THE BEGINNING.

THIS IS WHAT MALACHI BRINGS THEM FROM GOD: 'I HAVE LOVED YOU, SAYS THE LORD, BUT YOU ASK HOW HAVE YOU LOVED US?'

I FIND IT VERY MOVING THAT THE BOOK BEGINS IN THIS WAY -NOT WITH A DENUNCIATION BUT WITH THIS ALMOST -ALMOST HUMBLE STATEMENT OF GOD'S LOVE.

I HAVE LOVED YOU. IT DOESN'T MEAN JUST IN THE PAST -ONCE I DID, NOW NO LONGER. RATHER IT IS 'I HAVE SET MY LOVE UPON YOU - YOU HAVE BECOME THE OBJECT OF MY LOVE'

THIS IS THE GOLD STANDARD. THEY WERE IN A MESS -LIVING VERY BADLY, FULL OF DOUBT -AND THIS IS WHERE GOD BEGINS.

I GUESS THIS IS JUST THE SAME FOR US. WHEN WE FEEL LOW AND HELPLESS, WHEN IN OUR HEARTS WE KNOW FULL WELL THAT WE ARE STRAYING WELL OFF COURSE, WHEN MAYBE WE KNOW THAT IT IS A LONG, LONG TIME SINCE WE HAVE HAD A PROPER CONVERSATION WITH GOD; THIS IS WHERE GOD STARTS WITH US 'I HAVE SET MY LOVE UPON YOU, YOU ARE IN MY LOVE.'

WE CAN TAKE IT IN ...BUT, WE SAY, BUT -*How?* HOW HAVE YOU LOVED US? AS IF TO SAY "THIS IS ALL VERY WELL, BUT WHERE IS THIS LOVE? WHAT DOES IT DO? WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? WE KNOW THE WORDS ABOUT THE LOVE OF GOD BUT HOW DOES THE REALITY WORK IN EXPERIENCE?

HOW CAN GOD ANSWER THIS? WELL -TO THESE PEOPLE -THE JEWS- HE POINTS TO WHAT HE HAS DONE - IN LOVE HE HAS MADE THEM A PEOPLE OF HIS OWN. HE HAS CHOSEN THEM; HE HAS BEEN THEIR GOD SINCE THE DAYS OF ABRAHAM. THEY CAN KNOW HE LOVES THEM BECAUSE OF WHAT HE HAS DONE FOR THEM.

IS THERE A PARALLEL FOR US CHRISTIANS? -WELL YES, AND IT GOES LIKE THIS. GOD SAYS: 'I HAVE SENT MY SON FOR YOU, I HAVE CHOSEN YOU , MY SON HAS DIED FOR YOU.'

THIS BOOK -AND THIS SERMON BY THE WAY, IS A SORT OF OVER VIEW -I'VE TAKEN THE WHOLE BOOK AND LOOKED AT THE MAIN THEMES - THIS BOOK EXAMINES THE MALAISE OF A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY. THIS

IS THE SAD CONDITION THAT THEY HAD GOT INTO. I CAN'T HELP SEEING A PARALLEL -TRUST HAS BROKEN DOWN INTERNALLY AND THE FAITH AND THE JOY THAT SUSTAINS US HAS TAKEN A BIG KNOCK.

HERE THE JEWS DOUBTED THE LOVE OF GOD

THEY DOUBTED THE REAL VALUE OF WORSHIP -THEIR WORSHIP HAD LOST THAT REAL RESPONSE TO GOD'S LOVE -AND OF COURSE WE NEED TO WATCH OURSELVES HERE. IT IS EASY TO FIND OURSELVES BECOMING CASUAL, ANNOYED BY PETTY THINGS -THE WRONG TUNE - BLAMING THE FORMS OF WORSHIP FOR SOMETHING WHICH, TRUTH BE TOLD, IS ACTUALLY GOING ON IN YOUR OWN HEART.

PREPARE YOUR HEART FOR WORSHIP. ENTER WHOLEHEARTEDLY INTO THE WORSHIP, PRAISE GOD WITH YOUR WHOLE BEING. THE ARGUMENT, REMEMBER, IS THAT HE LOVES YOU! HE HAS GIVEN HIS SON FOR YOU. WORSHIP HIM AND YOU WILL GIVE GOD PLEASURE AND YOU WILL BRING JOY TO YOUR OWN HEART. STIR YOURSELF AND ASK GOD'S SPIRIT TO HELP YOU.

THEN THEY DOUBTED THE VALUE OF PREACHING -THEIR TEACHING WAS ILL-PREPARED AND HALF HEARTED SO THEY WERE NOT LEARNING ABOUT GOD ANY MORE. OK -GULP!

THEN THEY DOUBTED GOD'S JUSTICE -THE CRY WENT UP 'IT'S NOT FAIR'

AND THEN THEY DOUBTED THE VALUE OF THE WORK OF GOD.

IT WAS A MESS AND MALACHI GOT THE JOB OF TELLING THEM.

IT WOULD SEEM THAT MOST OF THEM TOOK VERY LITTLE NOTICE. SOME UNDERSTOOD AND RESPONDED TO GOD'S LOVE, BUT MOST OF THEM STAYED DOWN IN THE GLOOM. AND THAT'S ALMOST ALL THE BOOK -EXCEPT FOR THIS SORT OF POSTSCRIPT. THE PEOPLE ARE TOLD TO REMEMBER THE LAW OF MOSES AND WAIT FOR THE HERALD -WAIT FOR THE MESSIAH.

THAT IS WHY THIS IS AN ADVENT READING -IT IS ALL ABOUT THE WAITING. THEIR WAITING WAS FULFILLED WHEN JESUS CAME -AND THAT'S WHAT WE CELEBRATE AT CHRISTMAS -BUT OUR WAITING IS FOR HIS COMING TOO.

WE LOOSE THE PLOT -WE GET THAT HORRIBLE EMPTY FEELING FROM OUR RELIGION WHEN WE LOOSE THAT PERSONAL CONTACT WITH JESUS CHRIST.

THAT IS THE DEEP, DEEP LONGING THAT RUNS THROUGH ADVENT - 'EVEN SO COME LORD JESUS'.

OUR HEARTS ARE EMPTY AND AIMLESS -EVEN IF WE ARE VERY RELIGIOUS -WITHOUT JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF BEING PART OF OUR LIVES.

LET ME GIVE YOU AN EXAMPLE. TWO WEEKS AGO WE HAD A BAPTISM SERVICE -YOUNG PATRICK HOWELLS -IT IS IN A WAY A RELIGIOUS RITE -QUITE CAPABLE OF BEING BARREN, DEVOID OF MEANING. WHAT BRINGS IT TO LIFE IS THE LONGING THAT HE THEY WILL NOT HAVE TO SUFFER THE EMPTINESS OF LIVING LIFE WITHOUT CHRIST.

RATHER THAT AS HE GROWS SO HE WILL GET TO KNOW JESUS MORE DEEPLY.

MAYBE THAT IS YOUR LONGING TOO. WE ALL HAVE TIMES OF DOUBT AND QUESTIONING, AND WE ARE TEMPTED TO THINK THAT IF ONLY WE COULD FIND THE RIGHT ANSWER ALL WOULD BE WELL.

ADVENT TELLS US IT IS NOT LIKE THAT -THE ANSWER -IF YOU LIKE -IS NOT AN IDEA -THE ANSWER TO OUR HEARTACHE AND OUR LONGING IS JESUS HIMSELF. SO PRAY QUIETLY DURING THIS SERVICE, DURING THE NEXT FEW WEEKS -'EVEN SO COME, LORD JESUS.'

AMEN