

Malachi 3:6-12

The prophet Malachi as we have been seeing through the early autumn was bringing God's message to God's people round about 433BC. The people had gone into exile around 570BC and some had returned and had resettled in Judah where the temple had been rebuilt. However life was not easy and because of that the people's trust in God was waning. We have over the weeks described it as the 'imperceptible abrasion of faith'. In the absence of the good life, the obvious blessings of God, the people were claiming that God had broken the covenant that he wasn't keeping his side of the bargain. Life is tough so where are you God – was their attitude.

What we saw from the outset that God was indeed keeping the covenant as he always will do because he is God. The words from 1:2, "I have loved you" are words of a covenant keeper and they echo through the book and indeed through the whole of the Bible.

However God's love is not indulgent. It is not a love which will accept and condone any kind of behaviour from his people. So he had brought judgment on his people and they had been taken into exile. Now God had brought his people back to his land but they were not enjoying his blessing. Instead they were facing judgement, Mal 3:5, "I will come near you for judgement".

However God does not want to bring judgement upon his people hence the message that Malachi had been bringing to God's people and the message we look at in our passage today 3:6-12.

As we look at the relationship of these people with God I want to focus upon four things God said to them.

1. I do not change v6

That is a big statement because for those who first heard the message so much had changed. Many had come back from Babylon and exile and life was very different. We in our own time recognise that things are always changing. We might watch 1919 and Downton Abbey on the TV but it is today 2011 and things are very different. They are very different than 1961 – 50 years ago. In 1961 the Beatles performed for the first time at the Cavern Club, black and white £5 notes were still legal tender, the construction of the Berlin wall began and people were hoping to win the football pools! How things change.

So what does God mean when he says he doesn't change? God was talking about his essential character and the way he deals with humanity. God is the same and the way he deals with people is the same throughout history.

Those of us who started the Bible Overview on Sunday saw how when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden God acted in judgement. However, the judgement was tempered with mercy and they were not destroyed. Through the Old Testament we see that repeated. God's people sinned

and God acted in the judgement of the exile but his people were not destroyed. So here God is displeased with his people but these descendents of Jacob have not been destroyed.

God is unchanging. He is unchanging towards us as well. We live between the two comings of Jesus, his birth in Bethlehem and his return as King and Judge. We often wonder why hasn't Jesus returned and the answer is because when he returns he will come as judge of all people and God in mercy holds that back because he doesn't want people to perish. We see this in 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

God is still the same today as he was when Malachi brought this message to these people and because God is unchanging it means his word is reliable and true.

It is true in terms of judgement. In the garden of Eden the message of the serpent to Adam and Eve was you will not die because God had said if they touch the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden they would die. God came in judgement on them because of their sin and while their death was delayed they did die. Whose word is true, God's or the devil's?

Over and again through the prophets God warned his people that he would come in judgement on them because of their sin. They ignored God's word and judgement came. God's word is true because God is unchanging. So with us, there will come a day when we will stand before the judgement seat of God. In Christ we will stand forgiven and secure but judgement will come because of sin and because of God's unchanging nature. His word that speaks of judgement to come is true. It will happen.

But also **his word is true in terms of mercy.** It was because of mercy God didn't destroy Adam and Eve immediately. It was out of mercy God sent prophet after prophet to show his people the error of their ways and it is because of mercy that Jesus has not returned. God shows his mercy in the second thing he said to these people

2. Return to me v7

Why did God say this if he is the unchanging God of judgement? Because he is also the unchanging God of mercy. So God didn't just call his people to return to him but he promised he would return to them. But the question of the people in v7 is "how are we to return?" They didn't understand what God was asking because they had no sense of having done anything wrong. Until we recognise that we have sinned we will not come in repentance. Joan Collins the actress in an interview once said "I have never done anything wrong, nothing I am ashamed of". That's not an unusual attitude. Over and again in preparing for a funeral I hear that the deceased was a good man, who never had an unkind word for anyone never did anything bad to anyone. Where there is no awareness of God there is no awareness of sin and the need to return to God.

What about us?

I was at home the other evening and as it was a bit cold I'd lit a fire. I sat pretty close to it for a while but as I got hotter I moved further away until I was so far removed I couldn't really feel the effects of the fire at all. That was what had happened with these people and what happens to us. They had moved away from God and as such he was having little effect upon their thinking and their acting. It is as we drift away from God that he no longer has a hold on our lives, no longer is able to exert his rule and we live godless lives. This is the imperceptible abrasion of faith that the book is all about. When God is no longer central to our thinking and acting we increasingly live godless lives and yet somehow still think we are OK.

However, while we may forget God, God doesn't forget us. He longs for us to return and when we do then he returns to us, that is he accepts us back. That is wonderfully shown in the images in the story of the prodigal son. The prodigal son took his inheritance and left his father. He lived without a thought for his father and wasted all he had. Then in the depths of despair he thought of his father and as he returned to the father he found the father on the way to meet him. It is a great picture of what God was saying to his people here and says to us. Repent, turn away from the sin in which you are living and turn back, return, to God and he will, through the death of Jesus Christ, accept you and he will strengthen your relationship with him, undoing the effects of the abrasion of faith. Will you do that? Will you do it today? There will be people available at the end of the service to pray with you if you wish.

God called his people to return but they asked why what have we done?

3. You rob me v8

This is what God says they have done and what they need to repent of. They have been robbing God, forcibly taking something that was God's. What was it they had been taking? It was the tithes and offerings, v8. A tithe was a tenth part and it had become law under Moses that the people gave God a tenth of everything. So in Lev 27:30 "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD". It belonged to God it was his and they were holding on to it and so were robbing God. The offering probably referred to the gifts given so that the priests could live. This was one aspect of their sin in that they were not giving to God that which they knew under the law was due to him. As a result of their disobedience they were under curse, v9. God's anger was against the disobedience of his people as his anger is always against sin. In v11 God spoke about some of the problems with their agriculture and it may well be that this was what was happening as part of the action of God because of their disobedience. Here is the issue of which they needed to repent. However, this was their issue and we can't just apply this to ourselves and ask are you giving to God the full amount because we are no longer

under the law. There is no law telling us we should give a 10th of what God has given us, though some find that a helpful guide. However I want to make it clear this passage is not about giving. It is like the rest of the book about loyalty and about God's people putting God first. In this as in many other things we have seen they were not putting God first. God was not being honoured by his people.

As I was preparing for today I had in mind that song "I give you all the honour and praise that's due your name for you are the king of glory the creator of all things".

This is the heart of Malachi as God says I love you, that is I keep the covenant, will you remain loyal to me and honour me? Their giving of tithes and offering was one way in which they were not honouring God. It may be for some of us that as we think about our financial giving in the light of all that God the creator has done for us we may recognise that it is not honouring to God. Perhaps we have never stopped to think about what we give, even when we had the Giving in Grace programme, or we know we could give more but want to hold onto our money as if it is our own rather than something God has given to us. Are we honouring God in our giving?

However for some of us the issues may be very different. We may not be honouring God in our attitude to our work. We may be putting our work first before everything else and before God. Or it may be in our relationships with our colleagues at work or our parents or our children or our spouse. These may be relationships in which God is not being honoured. For others it will be our very attitude to God where he is not being honoured because don't give him the time he is due or the worship and praise he is due, our attitude to him and his word is careless.

Friends I want to point out this passage is not about money. That was the presenting issue for them. This passage is about God not being honoured because for his people his place in their lives was being eroded. Their attitude to giving was simply a sign of that as the things I have mentioned can be signs that our relationship with God has grown cold.

There are many ways in which we rebel against God and fail to give him the honour he is due and the call then as now is a. to realise our sin is against him and b. to return. That is what God is wanting to say to each of us this morning about our walk with him and the way in which we may not be honouring him. However there is a great positive alongside the fact that when we do repent God accepts us back.

4. test me v10

The challenge to these people was to bring their full tithe and then see what would happen. Test me God said. Bring the tithes and see how he would respond in mercy and forgiveness and how the curse would turn to blessings so great that v12 the nations round about would notice it and comment on the fact that God's land, God's place was "delightful" as God's people live in God's

place enjoying God's blessing. How would that happen? As God's people live in obedience to God's word. God's challenge was test me and see if my word is true. God's message to them as Paul's message to the Corinthians was "see that you excel in this grace of Giving" (2 Cor 8:7)

God longs to bless his people and the way to his blessing is through putting God first in everything and living in obedience to his word.

There is no greater joy than walking with Jesus, being close to him and experiencing his blessing – that is what we were made for. Living a life that honours God where we put him first and seek his will in everything brings great blessing. It may not be material blessing but God will bless our lives as we live them for him.

David in the Psalms encouraged the people "today if you will hear his voice do not harden your hearts" (Ps 95:7) and that same is there for us. God wants us to grow in our relationship with him and we will do that and receive his blessings as we turn away from those areas in our lives which do not honour, as we come back to him and allow him to draw close to us. God's word is true in this as it is in everything so may God give us ears to hear.