
¹ See, I am sending My messenger to prepare the way before Me, and the Lord whom 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.

² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. From Malachi 3:1-3 (NRSV)

Some time ago I came across a sign that someone had put up outside their business: "All you have to do to change your world is to change the way you think about it." My first reaction when I saw that sign was, "That's a load of rubbish! How does this work when someone has just died? You cannot bring someone back from the dead if you just 'change the way you think'." There are so many things (and you can probably think of some rather quickly) where you cannot change the way things are simply by changing the way you think. But on further reflection there may be something in that brief message. Certainly 'changing the way you think' cannot bring someone back from the dead. But the way one 'thinks' in relation to such an event will 'change one's world'.

This reminded me of another story I read some time ago called 'dead Christians'. A person writes: "I have a friend who became a Christian as a young adult, and then was ripped off and exploited by unscrupulous, predatory religious leaders. Disillusioned he wandered off into the world of alcohol and drugs and spent the next twenty years trying to get his spirituality from chemicals. One day in the mountains of Mexico, on the hunt for some drugs, he met some drug dealers who had recently become Christians. They talked to him about Jesus, prayed for him, and he re-entered the Christian way. Back home in Canada he knew he needed support in his life, but because of his earlier experience he was wary. One day he went into a bookstore and asked the manager, "Do you have any books by dead Christians?" He was given a book by A.W.Tozer, and for the next year he read nothing but Tozer – a 'dead Christian'. From there he cautiously worked himself back into the company of living Christians, in which he is now a most exuberant participant.

Here was someone 'burnt out' in life, and 'burnt off' by some aspects of 'the church'. So often we may feel 'burnt out' and 'burnt up'. And even in our preparations for Christmas – what is meant to be a most joyful time of year – even as God's people we may suffer from such 'feelings'. In a movie some time ago an actor had a line, "According to our researchers, reality is still the leading cause of stress."

When we come to the Bible Reading for today from Malachi 3, we come to a time when people had tried to create a new reality to suit their own image of life. They had tried to create a new 'reality' for God, and their worship of Him, to suit their own 'agendas' for life. Malachi, whose name means 'My Messenger', was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah, speaking at a time soon after the Exiles had returned to the Promised Land. Malachi prophesied in a time of spiritual decline and decay. (Do you think this sounds familiar?)

Corruption was widespread in the priesthood. Some believers had given up worship of the one true God and returned to 'idols'. Many people were negligent in worship, and were lacking in their giving to the church. Oppression of the poor was common. Many people had thought that faithfulness to God would lead to material blessing, but because it seemed that the ungodly were the ones to prosper, many people followed these ungodly ways.

It is not too difficult to come up with what we see as 'parallels' in our world today. It seems that many wish to change and alter God's Word to suit their own desires for life, or to avoid confronting something in their own life. And it wouldn't be too difficult for each of us to get on our own 'soapbox' to lament what we see as "All the wrongs in the world." But we are called to go deeper. We are called to be much more personal. We are called also to reflect on our own lives, and not only the world in which we live. Otherwise we will truly miss out on the really 'good news' that God wants to give us in Jesus.

Malachi was sent to speak how God would come to cleanse and refine His people. This would not result in the doing away with certain external ceremonies, but a call for 'clean hands' and 'pure hearts'. And Malachi spoke of the 'refiner's fire', and the 'launderer's soap' (who would care for newly shorn wool and animal skins). Already there is a prophecy here of Jesus. The launderer would often be located outside the city due to the unpleasant odours associated with this task. Christ Himself was also taken outside the city to cleanse us of our sins.

And because the people had become 'impure' they needed to be 'cleansed' of their sins; they needed a 'refiner's fire'. But the great skill in the 'refiner's fire' is to not get the metal too hot (which would burn away the precious metals), and also not to let it be too cold (so that the rubbish would not remain).

Matthew Henry, in his Bible Commentary of 1710 has said this: "Evil pursues sinners. God is unchangeable. And though the sentence against evil works be not executed speedily, yet it will be executed; the Lord is as much an enemy to sin as ever." But Henry goes on to say, "Because we have to do with a God that changes not, therefore we are not consumed because His compassion fails not... The believer need not fear the fiery trial of afflictions and temptations, by which the Saviour refines His gold. He will take care it is not more intense or longer than is needful for good."

In this season of Advent – just as the people of Malachi’s time were called to reflect upon their lives with an attitude of repentance, so too – we are called to reflect on our lives with an attitude of repentance and faith. Our prayer should be along the lines, “Set a fire down in my soul.”

On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came with fire to strengthen and renew His people. This ‘fire’ led people to repentance and faith and trust in the Lord Jesus. And living as God’s baptised people, daily repentance is vital for the Christian life. As we allow the light of God to penetrate the ‘darkness’ of the soul, and as we are cleansed by the precious blood of Jesus, so we are able to live lives with true peace and joy in our hearts. Sometimes the reason we may feel ‘burnt out’ or ‘burnt up’ is that our heart is not fixed on Christ, our Saviour. Let the fire of God’s love consume your sin. Be honest. Be open. Allow yourself to be confronted by the fullness of God’s Word, and you will know His peace.

We also know that our heart may fail, our body may fail, but God remains a refining and renewing strength forever.

At this time of year we are getting ready to celebrate the ‘advent’ of God into this world. And the real gift of Christ, as you know, is the gift of Jesus Himself. John the Baptist was sent to announce, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” People do get ‘burnt out’ and ‘burnt up’ by life. God wants to ‘burn up’ the ‘rubbish’ of your life that you may be ‘refined’.

Today’s Old Testament reading is filled with anticipation, expectation and urgency! “Ready or Not... Here He Comes!” Do these words remind you of the childhood game we all played, “Hide-‘n-Seek?” Whoever was “It” would count and then call out loudly, “Ready or not, here I come!” Each player attempted to be “ready” so that they would not be caught “in the open” and unprepared!

The sense of expectation grows as the prophet proclaims, “Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the Messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says the Lord Almighty.” (Malachi 3: 1) This Messenger is none other than Jesus Christ Himself. This Messenger is the One whom Isaiah had seen in a vision, “I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple.” (Isaiah 6:1) This same Jesus was BOTH the messenger of the Father’s love as well as the message itself! He came among us, in the flesh, to bring us the message and assurance of the Father’s mercy, care and love for us; but more than that, His coming, His life and His death in our place, actually give us the gift of forgiveness and eternal life! He IS the Good News of our salvation! We have Life in and through Him!

Malachi 3:3 reminds us that the Lord “sits as a smelter and purifier of silver.” In His infinite love, God watches over us as we are going through the flames of the refining process. He is using our fiery trials to purge the impurities and remove the dross of sin and selfishness from our lives.

This is a picture of Messiah in His coming. He comes not to destroy but to refine, so that we might be like Him and share in His image. The refining process is seldom a happy or pleasant one. C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, describes what is often the painful refining process:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

Perhaps you feel as if God has forgotten you in the fire. Perhaps you feel as if He has gotten busy with other things and has left you to languish. But God watches over you in the refining pot. He never sleeps or slumbers because He never takes His eyes off His children.

This message of the prophet is truly one of hope. God doesn't leave us as we are – lost, broken, or impure, but is refining us to more visibly bear God's image. It's a process that hurts a little, as the impurities of our lives are burned away. But in the end, this process is one that allows us to shine even more brightly as God's people now and forevermore. He has 'changed the world' in Jesus. Let us look forward to the coming day of the Lord with joy. Amen.