

The Presentation of Christ - 28 January 2024

Message – The refiner’s fire

Creator, Merciful High Priest, and Help to those who are being tested, transform us into your likeness. **Amen.**

Our passage from the Hebrew scriptures, our first reading, as opposed to our reading from the letter to the Hebrews, in the church is the most frequently used portion of Malachi.

Its ambiguity has invited the church to interpret it with fluidity. We do not know who ‘my messenger’ and the ‘messenger of the covenant’ are and, once we acknowledge that ambiguity, we lose certainty as to who is ‘the Lord whom you seek’. We don’t know but it doesn’t matter.

We are, again, reading part of a passage. It should have at least one verse before it and up to three after it, depending on how you see the structure of the book of Malachi.

The name of the book is not the name of a prophet, rather, the name simply means messenger. Yet, who is that messenger, Malachi, John the Baptist, Christ, God? Again, we don’t know and it doesn’t matter.

The book is a series of questions and answers, almost a trial, starting with Israel accusing God of failing to fulfil the covenant. This quickly gets turned around to Israel’s failure to fulfil their side of the covenant.

Israel’s question ‘where is the God of Justice?’ is repeated at the end of the verse before today’s passage and, had we

read a little further we would realise that this passage is answering Israel's question, verse five, *'Then I will draw near to you for judgement'*, using the same word, miš·pāt (*mishpawt*), for Judgement as earlier for Justice and then verse six, *'For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.'*

Israel believed their suffering in exile was unjustified. The messenger, Malachi, is able to point out that, in the context of the covenant, no, God has not judged them as they deserve, God could justly have destroyed them. Instead, the refining of Israel is an expression of God's grace and love. Though they have not been all they were called to be, God is still with them, cares for them, and will transform them.

Our reading from Hebrew's is more obviously part of a larger section. The writer of the Hebrews writes well, with good rhetorical logic and style. Unfortunately, we know nothing about the author and audience beyond the letter. The author worked alongside St Paul but uses many images found nowhere else in the New Testament.

Steeped in the Hebrew scriptures, reflecting on the life of Christ, and speaking to the experience of those to whom they are writing, the author sees suffering as an integral, perhaps necessary part of life. The author is writing to a group of Christians who are facing great challenges and possible suffering.

In the face of this, the author points to the way of Christ and the fact that Christ has endured suffering and so identifies with our own suffering. There is no explanation of suffering

just the deepest acknowledgement of the reality of suffering and faith that it is a part of God's plan and that God is fully present with us in that suffering.

The language used of that participation is that of the ordination of the Levitical priests. Striking but perhaps not a surprise given the authors understanding and usage of Hebrew scriptures and imagery. Nonetheless, how many of us have considered that God may be setting us apart, ordaining us, for a particular purpose through our suffering. Yet, this is the path that Christ trod and so, it may be the path we are called to follow too.

One might, like the Israelites, wonder where the God of Justice is to be found in this. We don't get an answer beyond the revelation that Christ has suffered with us and that this is a part of God's purpose.

There is a part of the church that seems to think being a Christian exempts us from the sufferings of life, even though it suffering was a part of the life of the one whom we follow. This makes no sense of the gospel or the realities of life. In its extreme forms this belief does a lot of damage to those who experience suffering. They are often blamed for their suffering. Yet, this passage of Hebrews recognises that suffering is a part of God's mysterious plan.

Those numbered among the surprising large remnant who came to church on New Year's Eve, may be thinking today's gospel reading is very familiar, aren't I lucky preaching on the same reading only four weeks later. Last time, I drew out the theme of patient waiting, as Anna and Simeon

waited faithfully. I would like to suggest that they aged faithfully as well. It is perhaps a part of the same whole.

The letter to the Hebrews names the suffering from which Christ has freed us. We are freed from the fear of death. We are freed from fear of the journey that will get us there too.

As a priest, particularly as a chaplain, it has been my privilege to walk alongside many people in the process of letting go of parts of their life, the ultimate being letting go of life itself. For most of us there will be many letting goes along the way. Christ freely let go of his life and I have seen a surprising number of people reflect that same freedom.

Perhaps the greater challenge is the smaller letting goes that happen along the way. It starts earlier in life than we often realise. We let go of dreams and possibilities, though we still don't realise all the possibilities before us.

It is possible to embrace the smaller deaths willingly, in so doing the perspective of Christ can become a reality in our lives, *'for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'* In Anna and Simeon, we see this letting go of life in which is received fullness of life.

Letting go is not easy. The author of the Hebrews is inviting their readers to let go, to let go of the fear of death, to let go of the fear of suffering and to know that Christ walked this path and it was not the end, just a part of the journey.

My experience is that many people, whether they die at an early age or in old age, receive the gift of letting go at the

end of their lives. Yet, I also see how much suffering the struggle to let go along the way has caused.

There is a place for lamentation in recognising all that we have to let go. Sadly, we are not that good at lamenting corporately or giving space to those who need to lament when they are in that need. Don't just do something, be there for them, prepared to sit with them in their lament.

But we also need to tell the other side of the story. God is the refiner. Our suffering has the potential to bring about change, to transform us into people made in the image of God. It is not the only path but it seems to be God's chosen path more often than we would like. Our suffering can bring life in all its fullness, good news to be embraced and shared.

Refining is not a passive process on the part of the refiner. They do not just light a fire and leave it all to happen. It requires additives, careful control of the temperature, careful removal of the dross so that only that which is precious remains. For the purest metals it is not a onetime process but requires a variety of techniques.

So, it is for us. We are given opportunities along life's journey to be transformed. Will we embrace those opportunities, and will we walk beside those in the midst of such times. We are not the refiner. We can at most point the way though our calling is more probably just to be there as a reminder of God's faithful presence in all things and at all times, even in the midst of the fire.

Amen. Amen.