

## **Sermon 15<sup>th</sup> November 2009 (Malachi 1:1-5) “How have you loved us”**

It is six weeks now until Christmas, and only two until Advent.

I want to start a new sermon series this morning, one that will run into Advent, and so I've decided that we should look at the book of Malachi.

It is an appropriate book because it contains two of the Advent prophecies that point towards the coming of John the Baptist, but also because sitting as the last book of the Old Testament it is quite literally the “book before Christmas” – the book before the coming of Jesus.

However, it does come 450 years before Christmas (which is probably about the length of time we'd all like to have to be prepared for Christmas too!)

To give you a little background, Malachi is set in what is known as the “post-exilic period”. Now, if that means nothing to you, let me explain.

God's people entered the Promised Land, but generation after generation they were unfaithful to God. They were warned by prophet after prophet, until God's patience finally wore out. In 587 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, conquered Judah, sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple of Solomon, and took all the leaders of the people into exile in Babylon.

70 years passed, and then the Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Persians. Persia had a more enlightened policy, and allowed the exiled peoples to go home. And so, some of the Jews returned to Jerusalem under Zerubabel, they found the ruined city and they rebuilt the Temple of God. (You can find this in the Book of Ezra.)

However, in the years that followed, the people became very discouraged:  
the new temple was smaller than the old,  
the conditions were difficult,  
they were harassed by the Persian officials in Samaria,  
they were not at all prosperous.  
And they became fed up and depressed.

And so, at the time of Malachi, the relationship between God and the people is not good. It is not that they were idolatrous – the Exile had taught them not to do that – it was more that they had no real enthusiasm, their religion was half-hearted at best. They were going through the motions, they were ignoring the Law and its call for justice, their priests were corrupt, and their sacrifices were second rate.

And the people begin to question God's love:  
“Where is the proof that you love us?”  
“Where is the evidence?”  
“Where is our prosperity?”

You can see this questioning in 1:2 “How have you loved us?” – “What have you given us God?”  
“If you really loved us, surely our life would be better –  
surely we'd be prosperous,

surely we'd be victorious.

You say we are your special people, well, it doesn't feel like it."

Into that situation, comes the prophet Malachi.

(Or we might call him Malchy, being Scots)

Strangely, we know nothing about Malachi.

The book gives us none of the biographical clues we are given about other prophets.

Indeed we can't even be sure of his name.

"Malachi" means "my messenger", and so 1:1 may simply say "the Word of the Lord to Israel by his messenger".

But whatever his name is, Malachi might be described as a marriage guidance councillor.

He has God and Israel in his surgery.

Israel is bitterly asking "How have you loved me?"

and Malachi is encouraging Israel to stop, and to listen to God's response – both God's assurances of his great love, but also God's string of counter accusations:

"Where is your love for me Israel?"

"Where is your respect? Where is your faithfulness? Where is your worship? Where is your commitment?"

A lot of this concerns the nature of love.

When Israel asks "How have you loved us?" it amounts to saying:

"What's the benefit to us? What are we getting out of this? Where's our blessing?"

Actually, that is the response that a lot of Christian people have when things get tough.

"What's the point in having faith if bad things happen to me?"

"If God *isn't* going to look after my interests, my family, my health, my business, then why go to Church? Why be a Christian?"

"If I'm not getting something out of this, why should I persevere?"

The problem with this is that it is a very shallow view of love.

It's like a child who stamps their feet and says "you don't really love me!",

and when the parent replies "yes I do"

the child pipes up "no, if you loved me you'd buy me that bike!"

The child ignores all the past provision, all the long-term care and faithfulness of the parent, and focuses on the now.

We call this "cupboard love".

It is conditional love, which looks for personal benefit and immediate gratification.

It is selfish, shallow and immature.

The message of Malachi is that God's love is not conditional.

It is not conditional on us pleasing him, or giving him immediate pleasure (thankfully).

Nor does it promise us immediate gratification.

God's love (and this term is important) is rather **Covenantal**.

That is, it is based on God's long term commitment,  
God's eternal promise of faithfulness to us.

God promises to love us come what may.  
God promises to love us whatever we may do.  
God promises to love us to the end – even to the cross.

He made his covenant with Abraham – “you shall be my people, and I shall be your God”  
He made it again with Moses and the people at Sinai,  
and the whole story of the Old Testament is how God kept that covenant, kept his side of the bargain, even as the people constantly broke theirs.

The covenant was based not on gratification but on God's promise.

When couples come to me for marriage, I often discuss with them the difference between covenant love and conditional love.

So much love today is conditional.

People enter into a relationship, be it friendship or romantic, because it gives them something: happiness, sex, good-feeling, shared experiences.

Often, they hope, they imagine, they aspire, that the relationship will last – but the hope is based on the condition that the relationship will deliver, that it will “work for them”.

And if the condition is not met, or it becomes too hard, too difficult, or not fun, they turn away disappointed and say “well, sadly, that didn't work out.”

That's why in a pleasure-seeking, instant-gratification society, divorce will always increase.  
(Look at Malachi 2:10-16, and what do you see? Quickie divorces were in vogue in Malachi's day too.)

Marriage must not be based on conditional love – not even on optimistic conditional love – but on covenanted love.

Marriage is not based on the hope that it will gratify (although we do hope it will).

Marriage is not based on the expectation of happiness (although we do hope it is happy – and it certainly can be).

Rather, Marriage is based on a deliberate decision, on an act of the will, on a choice to love unconditionally.

A wedding should not be simply a recognition that I love you -

A wedding involves a promise that I will love you, I choose to love you, I decide to love you ...“for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health” come what may, till death us do part, Amen.

That promise, that covenant, makes the marriage.

Marriage is a covenant that reflects God's decision, God's promise, to love his own.

And, if a couple comes with a clear covenant view of marriage, then when times get tough, they say not “sadly that didn't work out” but “we need to work this out.”

But, this is not just about marriage.

In so many other ways today we live in a society where we refuse to commit – and any commitment is temporary and conditional.

People stick things out only as long as they are fun.

That's true of hobbies, education, the clubs we join, friendships, church membership, charitable work, or projects we help with. We have a tendency simply to quit when they begin to disappoint or when they no longer suit us.

Once upon a time, people joined a bowling club, or a tennis club, or a social club, or a union, or the scouts, and that was their club and they were committed for years, maybe for life.

But now we go to some activity this week, and we'll only come back next week if we are still enjoying it, and if nothing better to do comes along.

I noticed the Chief Rabbi has given a lecture recently<sup>1</sup> where, speaking of our selfish pleasure seeking culture, he argued that the reason that the birth rate is falling alarmingly among Western Europeans is that we are simply too selfish to have children. Children involve commitment, sacrifice and long-term limitations, and since we don't want to restrict our lifestyle and limit our fun we either opt not to have kids, or to have very small families.

Anyway, let's get back to Malachi. We are only on the first verse.

Chapter one, verse one *"An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi."*

Now, the word "oracle" can equally be translated "a burden".

Malachi feels the message he has to deliver as a burden – a compulsion he has to deliver to the people.

Interesting, the introduction will be about love, and the Scripture uses the word "burden".

But actually, that's right – love is a burden.

Love is a heavy load.

Love constrains us.

Love prevents us doing what we want.

Love restricts our choices.

Love binds us when we'd rather escape.

Love forces us to stay put and buckle down.

Whoever called marriage "the ball and chain" had a good point.

But our permissive society tries to use love as an excuse to do the opposite, as a permission to do what I selfishly want to do.

Adultery is justified because "well we fell in love"

Sexual immorality is justified "well we are in love"

and "If you love me, you'll sleep with me".

But true love, covenantal love, isn't about me doing what I want, and getting what I want.

It isn't about me gratifying my desire of the moment.

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<sup>1</sup> See the article in the Telegraph 05 Nov 2009.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/religion/6507782/Europeans-too-selfish-to-have-children-says-Chief-Rabbi.html#>

It is about me choosing to commit myself – choosing to take on a restriction – choosing something that isn't about me and my wants at all.

And that's true of the love that leads to marriage, to friendship, to community, to charity, to service of the needy, or indeed to the worship of God.

I wear a wedding ring – as do many of you.

A wedding ring is a stop sign.

It is a sign that closes possibilities down.

It says "I am in a covenant"

It says "I am not available"

It says "certain things are not possible for me".

(And it prevents all the young women here throwing themselves at me – that is not allowed either.)

A wedding ring says – I am not free. I cannot gallivant. I need to be home. I have responsibilities.

All covenant commitments are burdens.

They are not about doing what we want to do, what gratifies us, what makes us instantly feel good.

They are all about long-term commitment, even when we'd rather not. They are about sacrifice and laying aside myself, come what may.

And because our God is the God of the covenant, and has promised to love us, we are called as Christians into covenant love:

in our commitment to God

in our commitment to each other

in the work into which he calls us

in our commitment to the congregation

in our relationships with our friends.

Christian people are to be people who commit, and not people who quit,

people who keep their promises and not a people who duck out because there's more fun over there.

What then is the nature of God's love?

Verse 2, "I have loved you," says the Lord. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'"

And God responds to that question, not by rehearsing all that he is giving them, and listing their blessings – rather he responds by reminding them of a story, the story of Jacob and Essau.

Israel was descended from Jacob (indeed Jacob was later named Israel),

but there were two brothers – Jacob and Essau.

Essau was the elder;

Essau was the stronger;

Essau was the more obvious choice for God's love and God's plan of blessing.

Jacob was a rascal, a cheat, a thief. He deserved nothing.

But God chose Jacob. God made Jacob into a great people. God made his promises to Jacob.

What's the point of the story?

God has chosen us.

God has chosen us to be his people and bear his promise.

We are not the obvious choice.

We have nothing much to offer.

But God's choice and love is not conditional.

It is not based on our goodness, our suitability or our righteousness,  
it is not based on our potential to please him, or to satisfy him.

But he chose us – he decided for us – he promised to us – he committed to us – all by his own will and decision.

And that's the doctrine of election.

God chose me. And why he chose me is a mystery.

But he has utterly committed himself.

He has covenanted.

He will not quit

He will not take his love from us

He will not change his mind

He will not stop

He will not say "sadly, that relationship didn't work out".

And we are to know that this non-quitting love of God is based on his eternal promise.

This is important because it means that we can be assured of God love, even when we don't get instant gratification, even when the blessings and benefits are hard to see.

Our love for God does not have to be cupboard love.

Of course there are times when we are well aware of God's blessings.

We sang earlier "Great is thy faithfulness" which has the line "morning by morning new mercies I see".

But sometimes it is very difficult to see the mercies of God.

Later we will sing "O love that wilt not let me go" – a hymn written in suffering, grief and pain, which contains the line "I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain, that morn shall tearless be" – and that speak to the times when the rain is pretty clear, and it can seem for the time that the promise is almost vain.

But we know God's love is bigger than our inability to see the immediate benefit.

But there's something else here.

Sometimes when Christians speak of the love of God, they imagine that God is some sort of a gooey, lovey-dovey sort of God, who just can't help being nice.

God just loves because that's what he does.

And they imagine that such a lovey God must be permissive.

Such a lovey God must always indulge – always tolerate – always forgive – never condemn.

And the love of God is then used as an excuse for permissiveness, indulgence, pleasure seeking, and basically me doing what I want to do.

But that's not God's love.

God's covenant love is directional, it is aimed at you, and it is all about commitment.

God's love is a burden to him.

It is a heart-breaking, son-sending, cross-taking, self-dying, costly love.

And it invites us into a relationship of sacrifice, discipline, commitment and response.

For Malachi, this love was a burden.

Paul states that the "Love of Christ constrains us", or "compels us" in our service.

It drives us to love and to serve and to sacrifice and to commit.

The last thing this is an indulgent love that invites self-indulgence.

This is the love that is obedient to death on a cross, the love of Christ crucified.

There's the challenge.

Are we to be fair-weather Christians?

Coming to Church for what we get out of it?

Our commitments conditional on there being something in it for us?

Doing things as long as we feel we're "getting something out of it"?

Or are we willing to be those who have experience the covenant Love of God.

The love that calls us to love unconditionally, because we have been unconditionally loved.

The love that calls us to choose to take up a cross and to commit to bearing a burden, because we have been loved by the one who chose us, and committed to us.

May we know the covenant love of God.

Amen.

