

Candlemas, Eucharist

Malachi 3:1-5, Hebrews 2: 14-end and Luke 2: 22-40

Mother Emma

How much do you feel you know about the prophet Malachi? Possibly not much. I confess I found myself quite challenged on this subject when I was preparing today's sermon, as the prophecy of Malachi is only seldom used in the readings of the Lectionary. Malachi is one of the books of the "minor prophets" bunched together at the end of the Old Testament, and probably written at various times during the fifth and sixth centuries BC.

Interestingly, the name "Malachi" actually means "my messenger", and some scholars believe that this wasn't a single prophet, but a collection of writings from a group of prophets seen as the Lord's messengers. Their words appear to date from a time after the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, and had rebuilt their Temple, but not yet refined the Temple worship to the standards of purity and integrity longed for by the prophets.

The words of Malachi are harsh in their judgment - especially of the priests who were all drawn from the tribe of Levi, and who performed the rituals and sacrifices of Temple worship.

Perhaps like the third sons of landed gentry who conventionally went into the Church in the eighteenth or nineteenth century here, the fact you were a member of the tribe of Levi didn't necessarily mean you felt especially called to be a priest, and Malachi berates them graphically for their lack of dedication, declaring:

'What a weariness this is', you say, and you sniff at me, says the LORD of hosts.

But he also condemns all the people for their lack of faithfulness, and a failure to offer pure and holy worship to the Lord.

In our passage this morning, he prophesies, "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple." This Lord God will come as an awe-inspiring judge, who will purify his people and their priests, and call out all who treat others with contempt, and do not reach out with generosity and compassion to the needy, the foreigner and the underling. He will come in the blaze of light caused by a refiner's fire, when the metal worker burns out the imperfections in gold and silver, leaving them pure and beautiful, and he will likewise burn out our imperfections and bring us into his light.

The Evangelist Luke would agree with all these images – he too believed that God's people should be reminded to orientate themselves first and foremost towards helping those less fortunate. Yet the story he records in our Gospel reading today shows how utterly mystifying Jesus' first appearance as the Messiah in his Temple must have been for Jews fed by the dramatic images found in the prophetic writings – or indeed in the words of our Psalm

"It is the Lord strong and mighty... Lift up your heads O ye gates, and the King of glory shall come in."

As Mary brings the six-week-old baby Jesus to the Temple, to be ritually purified after her childbirth and to give thanks for the safe arrival of her child, only the two very old people who have spent their lives waiting and praying for the arrival of the Messiah, recognise in the tiny child, the King of glory himself. No doubt others around them were going about their daily rituals and prayers in the Temple; they may even have been saying traditional prayers for the coming of the Lord's anointed, but failed to recognise God himself, manifested as a vulnerable child.

The writer to the Hebrews said in our second reading, "*he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect...*" and here in this ordinary child, Simeon recognises "*a light for revelation*

to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." In the first instance, it is not the dramatic roaring flames of the refiner's fire which announce the coming of the Lord, but an old man's vision of a light which will shine God's light into all nations.

The Feast of Candlemas, celebrated forty days after Christmas Day, the time when Mary and Joseph would have come to give thanks, was probably superimposed onto the date of an ancient Festival of Light, as the days begin to get longer, and we are blessed with the hope of spring. On this Feast-day, candles were traditionally blessed to be used during the Church year (as we shall do at Evensong), but also for people to take home as reassurance that the light of Christ always burned in their homes, as we did with the children at the start of this service.

All these readings for Candlemas have a message for us as we reflect on the light of our faith today.

God may not have appeared on earth, at least in his First Coming, as the roaring fire which visibly burns away the imperfections of the world; yet his concern for the poor, the lowly, the foreigner and the exploited is always with us, and should direct our hearts in humility as we contemplate our society and our daily lives, and the ways we may serve him in addressing these imperfections. The fact that he himself came as one of those despised, poor and unnoticed is an indicator of the humility we aspire to. Yet with our knowledge of the Death and Resurrection of Christ, we recognise that in the baby held and blessed by Simeon, we see the King of Glory, the Lord of hosts, who entered the gates of his own Temple.

On Candlemas Day, we turn from the celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany, and in Simeon's words to Mary: "A sword will pierce your own soul too", we are reminded that we are now beginning the long journey to the pain and sadness of the Cross in Holy Week. At the end of this service, the baby Jesus will be taken from his crib, and carried away to await next year's Nativity, as we together turn from the Crib to the Cross.

Yet in our preparation to walk with Jesus on this journey, we can also find comfort in Paul's assurance: "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested."

Amen