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Malachi 3.1-4  
Philippians 1.3-11**   
**5th December 2021**

## Judging by Love

In church we don’t often hear words from Malachi, the last book of the Jewish scriptures. Yet, today on this second Sunday in Advent, the lectionary draws us to it. So, still at the beginning of our Advent journey we listen to words from the prophet who closes the Old Testament.  
  
And these are words which, for many, seem oddly familiar because they are included in the libretto of Handle’s Messiah in the aria *Who may abide the day of his coming*, and the Chorus *And he will purify.* Even as I say those phrases, I can hear the bouncing notes, as it were, ringing in my ears,  
  
In our church bibles it’s put this way: *Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand firm when he appears? He is like a refiner’s fire…*  
This is the picture of a God, who in some senses, is bringing us to judgement or, at least, appearing among us as our judge. And, traditionally, that has been an Advent theme.   
  
Maybe in times past the Church was too keen on the idea of Judgement and created the image of a God constantly keeping a critical eye upon us, ready to pounce with waging finger the moment we went off the straight and narrow. And perhaps today the opposite is equally true, and we become too ready, even eagerly dismissing the notion that there is any place for the idea of Judgement in modern faith at all.  
  
Well, I rather think both those views are too extreme and that we need to find a middle way that takes seriously the idea of judgement within the overarching biblical understanding of God as Love. For surely living under good and fair judgement is entirely compatible with living under a wise and loving God.  
  
So, rather than get-side tracked by ideas from Dante’s Inferno which moulded the medieval Church’s view of what it called The Last Judgement, how might we think about God’s judgement prompting, shaping and enabling us in our everyday lives? Dante’s understanding focuses on the idea of punishment, but I think a broader biblical view leads us to ideas of transformation.  
  
When God speaks into any community or comes alongside any individual, we begin to see ourselves in a new way. God’s light shines into our hearts and we can make uncomfortable discoveries about ourselves, our motives and behaviour. Yet that isn’t the complete purpose of God or his light. Those epiphanies, or the eureka moments when we see our faults or grasp for the first time where we went wrong, are full of potential. We can change. We can seek forgiveness if we have wronged someone. We can work towards reconciliation. We can become renewed and re-fashioned.  
  
That, I think is why Malachi talks of God coming among us like a refiner’s fire, making us stronger, or with Fuller’s soap, making us cleaner. Judgement is not to bring us down but to build us up, making life better, clearer and fairer.  
  
An example of what that life might look like, as God’s right judgements transforms the way we think and act, is given to us in in today’s second reading from Philippians.

Paul writes this letter from prison and he’s waiting. In those far off days prison wasn’t normally the punishment, just a waiting place as the sentence tis passed and then the execution takes place.   
  
So, you might have thought, given his dire circumstances, because according to Roman law he was surely guilty and deserving of death, for he had advocated the worship of another king other than Caesar, you would have thought that just maybe he would be downcast. Yet Philippians is one of the most joyful and loving of all his letters.   
  
In his waiting, Paul both longs for others, and experiences for himself, a deep-down joy.  
  
Advent is for us a season of waiting. Over these last two years we have travelled through such uncertain and anxious times, so Paul’s example of keeping faith and living with joy during anxious days is both apposite and exemplary.   
  
He says to the congregation at Philippi that he is thrilled to hear of their faithfulness to God in their worship and service.   
  
Paul is not in ministry for the numbers. He doesn’t breeze in and out of a church’s life, happy to have planted a congregation at Corinth but then rushing off to notch up another at Ephesus. As if there was a league table on which he needed to be on top.  
  
He plants churches, and then often stays at them for months getting them established, sometimes introducing them to a new Pastor, like Timothy, and regularly keeping tabs on them and writing letters of encouragement.

The Students Union of Howard University in the States has a great motto which goes: *Friendship is essential for the soul.* And that’s obviously how Paul saw these Philippians, he loved them as true friends, and nothing thrilled his heart more than to know they wanted to join him in being friends of Jesus too.  
  
Now Paul’s opponents really hated the way he did church. They hated the fact he didn’t insist Gentile Christians should be circumcised. They wanted the new Church to be rule based but Paul spoke instead of a type of freedom based upon the love of God expressed in Jesus Christ. Paul’s faith was relational not ritualistic.  
  
That’s why he writes in verse 9 of Philippians 3 that his one prayer for his friends at Philippi is that their *love may grow richer.*  
  
Remember again, he writes with such beauty from a dark prison cell almost certain that he is awaiting a death sentence. At such a bleak time he speaks of joy and is motivated by love.  
  
He ends this chapter by employing an agricultural metaphor saying he longs for them to produce a harvest of goodness in their lives.   
  
And that was important for Paul because his ministry was constantly being judged by the legalists around him who said his open and love centred gospel would inevitably not be enough, it wouldn’t produce good fruit, instead his opponents predicted it would bring people down as they went off the rails.   
  
But Paul says, *No*. For him the true measure of Christian discipleship is not how many rules you have kept but how much love you have shown.  
  
Dietrich Bonhoeffer used to say about Christmas, and this was pre-war, that we are in danger of making it trivial. This is what he wrote: *We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting its serious aspects…*  
  
I don’t think Bonhoeffer is a kill joy, he isn’t the Grinch who stole Christmas. He just thinks Christmas is a big deal. God among us. God comes as a servant. What a challenge!  
  
And in a sense both passages before us today, in their own way, urge us to do one thing. To take our faith seriously. It matters.   
  
In Malachi there is this idea we need to make right judgements in life. We need to prayerfully ponder the way we might live.  
  
And in Philippians there is this serious word from Paul, commending his friends for living such a life, a life of joy and one of love and his prayer that they may go on to produce a harvest of goodness.

Well, the serious message before us all in the weeks and days to come is that *Love came down at Christmas,* and we are called to live joyfully in the glow of that love all year through. It’s a transformational love.  
  
As I’ve pondered the theme of judgement in preparing for today, my mind has constantly gone back to a childhood memory.  
  
On more than one occasion I recall my grandmother sitting me down and being ‘serious’ with me. (Bonhoeffer would have liked that!) This lady, from whom I only ever received constant love and affirming encouragement, if I had been nasty to my brothers or unkind to my parents, she would simply say: *I don’t think that was very loving Ian, was it?*  
  
It was a wise judgment. Given to me by someone who only ever wished the best for me. And her words went deep. Words from someone I knew who loved me. Words that made me see things differently. Words that made me want to change and be worthy again of her love and trust.  
  
God’s judgment is for our good, so that we too might change. My grandmother is long since gone, yet maybe God still speaks to me with the memory of her words: *I don’t think that was very loving Ian,* and once more I want to change in the process of becoming the disciple Paul longed and prayed for, one grounded in love and filled with joy.  
  
May it be so, in the name of God, whose judgements are always wise and who longs for us to become people of love and joy. Amen.  
  
*Ian Green, Amersham, 2nd December 2021*