

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

THE LAST PROPHET

11th December 2016

Malachi 3:1-8

Matthew 11:2-11

On this third Sunday of Advent we come to the last of the prophets. We come to Malachi, and we come to John the Baptist. Malachi is the last of the prophets whose writings are found in the Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures. He could be said to complete the prophetic cannon. And as the last of the prophets, he has a lot in common with his colleagues. He talks of what the people are failing to do, far more than what they are doing right. And he talks of judgement. And this time when he talks of the Day of the Lord, he also talks of a herald coming before it, a herald whom right at the end of his writings he names as the prophet, already ancient in his day, Elijah. And so, as people waited for the day of the Lord, the day when the righteous would be rewarded, when everything would be restored to its proper place, the day when God would redeem his people, they also looked for "Elijah" to come as its herald.

Elijah – the prophet who had taken on the wicked king Ahab and his corrupt queen Jezebel; the prophet who had foretold drought and it had come; the prophet who had taken on all the prophets of the false god Baal in a bizarre contest on Mount Carmel, and won; the prophet who had run from Ahab for forty days and forty nights and who had made his complaint to the God who was not in earthquake, wind or fire but in stillness and silence. That Elijah, rugged and implacable, determined and defiant, this was the herald of the Day of the Lord who was awaited. Malachi said that he would be like refiner's fire and fuller's soap – items which purify thoroughly, but not gently.

And John the Baptist arrived. John, who certainly looked the part – dressed as he was in rough camel's hair belted with leather; John who lived the part, making the wilderness the place of his ministry, though it meant that he had to eat what he could find there – locusts and wild honey; John who sounded like the prophets of old as he denounced the Pharisees and Sadducees – religious leaders, as a brood of vipers, assuming that their pedigree guaranteed God's favour. John the Baptist arrived and told people to repent, because the kingdom of heaven had come near. He told people to do more than repent in word, but to do it in deed, bearing fruit worthy of repentance. They were to share their goods with the poor – John made it a disgrace to own two coats while there was anyone with none; they were to be honest in their dealing with each other; they were to live in peace and content, even if circumstances gave them excuse or opportunity to be otherwise. John arrived and he warned

people that the one who was to come after him would be more ferocious. That he would baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that his winnowing fork was in his hand to gather in those who were like good wheat, but that he would burn those who were like chaff with unquenchable fire.

With a herald like that, you wonder that anyone was keen to see this Day of the Lord, or to meet the Messiah who would bring it in.

John was really very much the Elijah figure who people were waiting and watching for. But John's problem was that Jesus wasn't quite what he was expecting.

By now John is in prison, placed there for his faithfulness to his calling and his message. He had dared to speak the word of God even to Herod, man who thought he was in charge, and told him that he should not be living with his brother's wife. He was imprisoned and had time to reflect on how Jesus was living up to the billing he had given him. And he began to wonder if he was really the one whom he had pointed out as "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) And so, John expresses his doubts – is Jesus really fulfilling the words of the prophets, or indeed his own words? "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

During our study of the prophets, people in both Bible study groups have expressed doubts. We have read of God as portrayed by some of his prophets – vengeful, judgemental. Demanding, and we have asked if this is the God of love we know through Jesus? Surely it is not the same God? John's doubts are like some of those we have expressed during our study, only in reverse. We say – is this the God of love that we know through Jesus? He says, is this the God of wrath, the one who will winnow and refine, (which are painful processes), the one who draws near in judgement?

And so he sends word to ask Jesus, and he get back the answer: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the poor have good news brought to them. *And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*" All these good things are mentioned by the prophets, in particular, they are mentioned by Isaiah, as things that would show the presence of God. No, Jesus wasn't doing and being what John and his prophetic predecessors – including Malachi – had expected. But why should he? Why should they expect that he would?

Jesus upset the paradigm, the paradigm of judgement, of fierce and forbidding holiness. Jesus turned on its head the expectation that God would come in wrath. And he knew that he was doing it. Remember in his story of the prodigal son, when the prodigal comes to his senses and decides to return home, his own sense of guilt and unworthiness made him expect a cool welcome. He didn't care. He would be glad to be a servant, if only he could be home again. But when he gets there, his loving Father upsets all his ideas of how he might be received, as he runs to meet him, throws his arms around him and prepares a welcome feast. Jesus knew how we expected God to come among us. Jesus knew that our own feelings of guilt and unworthiness colour our picture of God. If God were like us, we think, then he would be angry.

When I was a child, my father was the headmaster of the village school. Because in school he was a little fierce when needed, and a little un-approachable, a slightly awesome figure, especially to wrong-doers among the children, some of my classmates were at first a little reluctant to come to my house to play. Mr Candlish would be there, and they were in awe of him. But I only knew him as my Dad. I knew he wasn't like that. I knew he joked and laughed and played with us, and that though he could get cross, he never stayed angry for long. And I encouraged my friends to come because I wanted them to know the Dad that I knew.

Jesus came to show us God as he knew him, God from the perspective of his son. Of course, he upset the prophet's paradigm: they couldn't know God the intimate way that Jesus did. Of course, when he showed us God it looked different than expected. How could it not? How could God among us possibly look just as we had thought he would? If God were so small that our minds could compass him, then Jesus could not have needed to come, then, in fact, we would have no need of God at all.

Jesus talked about John, the true last of the pre-Christian prophets, and he called him great, a prophet and more than a prophet. He named him the anticipated Elijah. But he went on to say that although humanly speaking no one was greater than John, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven was greater than he. The least in the kingdom of heaven has discovered that God came among us in Jesus, and came in love, not judgement, in healing and restoration. The least of those in the kingdom of heaven have discovered that living God's way in response to God's love, living out of the love that we have received, while it may look very similar to living by God's rules, has a whole different feeling to it. It is the difference between doing something because you have to, and doing something because it shows your love for someone. John was a great man and a prophet, but he still expected Jesus to conform. Jesus came to break the paradigm, to open up the family knowledge of God to all who would come after him.

In two weeks it will be Christmas, and if there is one thing we think we know forwards and backwards, it is the story of how Jesus was born. We know what the Bible says. Equally well, and sometimes not distinguishing the difference, we know the many traditions which have grown up around that story – Mary wearing a blue dress? The ox and ass kneeling – or even being there? A donkey? And so on. We think we know Christmas forward and back, and so, although we love to celebrate it, it is with the joy of the familiar, not the delight of discovering something new.

But the point of God coming among us is to stand our expectations on their heads. The point of Jesus being born as one of us, not coming in some more "spiritual" way, is to bring God into the most mundane, painful, tedious and delightful circumstance – because what is more everyday than the birth of a baby – it happens all the time? And what is more painful, and what more tedious than some of the duties and tasks of caring for a baby, doing the same dirty, smelly jobs over and over. And yet what is more delightful?

In the next two weeks, and the two weeks of Christmas which follow, we will be busy, and often it will be with delightful things, and sometimes it will be with tedious things, and for some of us there will be pain of various kinds. And with all the Christmas

celebrations and preparations, there will still be the mundane things of life – cleaning and laundry and shopping and such like – to deal with as well. It is all part of the same thing. If we are even the least in the kingdom of heaven – and which of us would claim to be more? – then may we spend this Christmas looking for God’s surprising presence, not only in carols and services, but in every minute of every day. And not only at Christmas, but for ever. Amen.

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