



the Sunday focus

Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 39:

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Today's reading

Malachi 3: 8–18 (“Do not rob the Lord”)

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

You have spoken harsh words against me, says the Lord. Yet you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’ You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts? Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape.’

Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Christ is coming! let creation from her groans and travail cease (CH: 475)

Wake, awake! For night is flying (CH: 278)

Make way, make way, for Christ the King in splendour arrives (CH: 279)

People look East. The time is near of the crowning of the year (CH: 281)

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son (CH: 419)

In the Name of the Father and of

Last Sunday we had our first encounter with the book of the prophet Malachi on the first week of Advent. Today, we have our second encounter on the second week.

And can you guess what might happen seven days from now? (You'll have to wait and see!). It is enough to say that Malachi can prepare us – and prepare us well – in our journey towards Christmas, and in more ways than one.

In the earlier part of Malachi chapter 3 we learned last week about the need for the refiner's fire as the master craftsman burns away the dross and the dregs to reveal the purified ore of valuable metal. A bit like getting a flu jab, the process may be unpleasant yet it is nevertheless a process with a purpose, and a most valuable one at that.

Now in the next part of the same chapter, we find a continuation of this call to true discipline, as Malachi tells his readers that the time is right for them to face up to the need for personal commitment. In striking tones, the voice of God is presented by the writer as it calls out a very personal question:

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you!

Whether in the Ancient Near East of Old Testament times or the modern East Lothian of today, commitment is a subject which we need to take seriously as a community of faith. It seems that society as a whole has gone on a journey away from the call of "duty". Instead, so many 21st century people heed the call of "self-interest", looking only to their own personal choices and private preferences.

I was born in the 1960s. Maybe you were too. (Or the '50s, or '40s, or '30s or perhaps even the '20s). If you are my age or older, the chances are that you grew up in a society where many, many people were deeply committed to something far bigger than themselves. It might have been their commitment to God, worked out in faith as church members, elders, Guild office bearers, Sunday school teachers, choir members ... whatever. Or you might recall someone deeply committed to serving at a high level in a uniformed youth organization or a trade union or a political party. Not so long ago we were a nation of "builders" who were ready to roll up their sleeves and build and build and build.

After the Second World War, babies were born into a human race that was going through rapid change, with an era of newfound freedoms, consumerism, secularism, mass media, owner occupation, increasing prosperity ... and increasing opportunities. Households went from enjoying one bread-winner to requiring two, with "baby boomers" finding themselves as "latchkey kids", home at the end of the day much, much earlier than their parents. With so many new commitments to the family, commitment to the wider world beyond the home understandably took second place. And as modern-day pressures grew, that same postwar era saw massive rises in divorce rates too.

Unlike me, you were maybe born in the 1970s. (Or the '80s or '90s, or perhaps even the 21st century.) As a child, your world of internet access and social media would have been very different from mine. And that's fine! After all, planet Earth rolls onward and we must always be ready to consider moving with the times, when that is a valid thing to do.

The problem, however, is that our society's gradual contraction in commitment from "out there" to "in here" has come, in my opinion, at a cost to our spiritual and social lives.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

The harsh reality is that every single person in Scotland has lived the bulk of their lives in a setting of church decline. (For that statement to be disproved, by the way, you would have to show me a Scot who is 130 years old.)

What might the God of Malachi be saying to this generation? Is it possible that God is still speaking words of challenge this Advent as we look to our souls and to our consciences.

Might God still be ready to tell us to our faces to shape up and take faith seriously?:

"Put me to the test," says the Lord; "see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you."

It turns out that what Malachi is telling the people of 500BC is exactly what his writings are telling us today: get involved; get committed; see what it's like to live nearer to God; and see what that living does for you.

When it comes to your Christian devotion, where are you going to be? Outside the stadium with no interest in the game ?Or in the back row of the grandstand, watching from afar? Maybe down on the sidelines, cheering on the players?

Then again, it could be that you want to be a participant, right there in the thick of it, with all the dirt and grime, all the bruised shins and bloodied shirts.

I recently read an old story about a man (let's call him McTavish) who watched the lottery results every Saturday night. Each time the last ball was drawn he would let out a rasping cry of despair, turn his eyes up to the ceiling and complain: "is it too much to ask that I should win the lottery, Lord? Is it just too, too much to ask? You know me. You know that I have been your faithful servant, yet never once have I won so much as £50."

One night, just as he has posed his question for the umpteenth time in however many years, suddenly a voice booms forth from on high: "McTavish, give me a break – buy a ticket."

I would like to suggest that this Advent issue of commitment revolves around how we invest our lives in this hectic, frantic, frenetic 21st century of ours. Is our precious time to be spent primarily at home and at work? The answer to that question is an unequivocal yes for most folk today. Looking very, very simply at our employment time, our family time and our sleeping time, we can see that there might not be that much time left over. Still, if our lives are to be lived to the full, it surely falls to each one of us to work out how we split up and allocate what is left available to us. And when better to carry out this exercise in self-examination than in the days of preparation for the birth of the Messiah?

I recently read a piece by the theologian Tony Robinson who noted that we all need to look closely at God's call upon us: our time; our talents; and just what it is that we are doing with our brief span of life. It is so easy to be caught up in time-consuming action or inaction that draws us away from God's call. And yes, it can be far more difficult to stand back from it all and re-assess our priorities and our opportunities. Here is what Tony Robinson says:
God asks us to invest ourselves, to take a chance, to lean in, to get off the sidelines. Or as the poet Goethe put it, rather more eloquently: "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too."

"Put me to the test," says the Lord; "see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you."
Amen.

Praying for others

Prince of Peace,

We know that peace on earth can only come
when our hearts find their home in you.

In a season when every heart should be happy and light,
many of us are struggling with the heaviness of life.

We need your peace.

At a time when worries prevail,
let us remember the Good News again.

Grant us calmness:
your great tranquillity in the midst of our turmoil.

Still our souls and instil in us your perfect peace
that passes all understanding.

This Advent we ask you to make peace real
in our hearts, our churches and our homes,
that precious gift which you have promised us.

May this be a time of reconciliation,
and may your peace be real in our world.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers tiers (in tiers, as it happens):

The various tiers of lockdown – different across all the UK nations – are slowly driving me potty. Both with their complexity and with their variation across the country. The very, very good news is that the first vaccine against Covid-19 has been approved for use in the UK. We may see some folk getting their first dose of it before the end of the year.

This juxtaposition of tier and year has driven me to compose the following ditty. Sing it to the tune of *Baa Baa Black Sheep*. (You can tell lockdown is getting to me.)

*Tier one, Tier two, maybe we're in three.
Tier four, Tier nought, goodness me!
Where does the time go, has it been a year
since we have never had to live in a tier?*

*Vaccine, vaccine maybe there are three?
They can't come here soon enough for me.
One for the doctor and one for the nurse,
And one for the rest of us to lift this curse.*

*Hallelujah! Happy days draw near
When we'll no more have a tier!
When we can hug and when we can kiss,
But until then hand wash and mask it is.*