

Contemporary reference

Malachi 3.5

When couples came to book a wedding, I took them through all the nitty-gritty bits that they will have to decide. I explained that they will need to choose at least one reading from the Bible, although they are welcome to add to that any poems or other readings that they want. I am sure that for some of them, that is not an easy choice to make. They probably see the Bible as something fairly alien to their world – so they were usually glad that about 25 suggestions of Bible readings are provided. More often than not, when it comes to choosing Bible readings for a funeral service, I got told that they would leave it up to me. They have less time to choose, so I am happy to do that. But when I did a seminar on choosing readings for your wedding at the Confetti.Co shop on Tottenham Court Road twenty odd years ago - the only time I have starred in the West End! - one of the points I made was to ask them to read all the suggestions, and see what speaks to them. A surprising number of people find that looking at the texts really opens their eyes to how contemporary the Bible is. One couple said to me that making that choice had galvanised them into reading more of the Bible – so they were glad we had given them one, as we used to do for all couples getting married in our church.

It is extraordinary in one way, that words that maybe are more than two thousand years old seem so up-to-date. And yet in another way, it is obvious that they will be so, because although contexts and cultures change, at the heart of things, human beings don't. Let's take as an example the very last words of the Old Testament reading today. We are celebrating the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Malachi was writing soon after the time when that Temple had been rebuilt, after the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon - maybe about 460 BC. -a world away from us. But was it?

He is talking about God drawing near to his people for judgement – because then, as now, we are answerable to God. In total, the people he is against are those who do not 'fear' God. Now that means not 'being afraid of' but 'respecting – giving God his proper place'. But it is interesting to see what the evidence is that they are not giving God his proper place. Listen again to what he says:

I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien.'

Let me read that again from the Street Bible paraphrase.

'I'll turn up as prosecutor with cases full of evidence against witches, sleep-around merchants, liars in contempt of court, fat-cat bosses who rip off their workers, anyone who steps on those at the bottom end of the ladder, and all who stop foreigners getting a fair trial. – basically those who give me no respect, says God.'

Now let's see how times have changed, or rather haven't. Sorcerers or witches – Interest in the black arts is not confined to the innocent world of Harry Potter. Look in any library or bookshop, and there are shelves of books on the occult, and novels with occult themes. Many papers, including apparently quite respectable ones have their astrology column. There are all sorts of pseudo-religious cults which attract large numbers of followers. These are all 21st century manifestation of the same area Malachi was talking about when he mentioned sorcerers or witches.

Adultery seems to be taking over from football as the preferred sport of the nation. I remember years ago the late Jilly Cooper saying on TV that lusting after people was the whole point of having office parties. The TV thrives on titles like 'Desperate Wives' and 'Footballers Wives' – why not 'Desperate Husbands' and 'Netball Players Husbands' I ask myself?

Lying in and out of court is something we assume happens. Despite having a police force that is amongst the best in the world, we find rarely a year goes by without some evidence of corruption – manufacturing of evidence, planting evidence and so on. As with the soldiers who appeared to have ill-treated Iraqi prisoners, it is the odd rotten apple in the barrel which infects us all.

People being cheated of fair wages hasn't changed either. Despite years of legislation, it is apparent that men and women are not yet always being paid equally. Maybe you remember the tragedy of the immigrant workers in Morecombe Bay – illegal immigrants were prey to unscrupulous employers. Mind you it works the other way round too – the employees who cheat their employers are rife. We lose millions through office theft and fiddles – to say nothing of the black economy which avoids proper payment of tax. I doubt there is anyone reading or listening to this who has not been offered a cheaper rate for a job, cash in hand.

As for ill-treatment of foreigners – where do you begin? We have politicians tying themselves in knots trying to say they are open to refugees, but anxious to man the barricades. But right away from these high-level issues, it is clear that street vendors and others take foreign tourists for a ride.

These things may not be you or me personally. But they *are* us, because they are things in our society. The point Malachi makes is that any or all of these are evidence that we do not give God his proper place and respect. In other words he is underlining the religious significance of everything that we do. We cannot divide life in secular and religious compartments. It is interesting how many of these things were thrown at Jesus. On sorcery – they said that he 'cast our demons by the power of Beelzebub'. He was called 'a friend of prostitutes'. False testimony was at the heart of his trial. He was accused of conniving with those who cheated people of their money – a friend of tax-gatherers. Jesus, who came to be identified with us all, and to deal with human sin, got tarred with the brush of all these human failings – however unjust that may have been. We can't escape being tarred either. And it is Jesus who was seen in these ways who is our judge. He knows what it is like. The days of Malachi, or Jesus and our own are not so different as we might imagine.