

This reading begins with a rather dramatic statement. ‘See, the day is coming.’ This day will come, burning like an oven. Not cooking, or warming, but burning. This is a fierce heat, a burning heat that destroys and consumes. Instead of the refining fire of chapter three, this heat destroys, and its victims are the arrogant and all evildoers. They will be totally and utterly burnt up, right to the ground like stubble.

A dramatic statement about a dramatic day. The day in question is the ‘Day of the Lord’. The prophets especially say a lot about this day. In Israel it was a popular idea – a bit like the Second Coming is in America these days. People got very excited about prophecies like those in Isaiah 13, in which God promises to, ‘punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity.’ (v.11)

The people of Israel longed for the day when God would return to the Temple he left so dramatically in Ezekiel. They longed to be set free from their occupiers. As God promises in Malachi 1, he will tear down and destroy the cities of Israel’s enemies. On that day God will come and put the world to rights. The wicked will

be punished, the righteous rewarded.

And of course, the Israelites imagined themselves in the latter group: the righteous.

For the Israelites knew that they were God's chosen people. They were the descendants of Abraham, and of the promise God made to Abraham. Malachi begins by reminding the people that they have been chosen by God, and that every other nation has not been chosen by God.

But the Israelites had got confused. They equated 'chosen' with 'righteous' and 'not chosen' with 'wicked'. They thought that all of their national enemies were wicked, and that they themselves, as God's chosen people, were righteous.

They were right thinking that most of their national enemies were wicked in God's eyes, for they mostly worshipped idols. But they were wrong thinking that they were righteous simply because they were God's chosen people. You see, they acted as if they would be rewarded by God, whatever they did, simply because they were his chosen people.

And so we begin to understand what had been going wrong, that

led God to inspire Malachi with this message. In chapter one God accused the priests of not offering the best animals, but only those that were blind, lame or sick. They treated their duties as a chore, rather than a delight. In chapter two we read about the priests leading others astray by teaching them false things.

The people were sinning too, against one another, showing their unfaithfulness. And they were sinning against God, complaining that the wicked prosper while they do not, challenging God to do something about it, instead of trusting in his good purpose.

It's a damning portrait of religious and social life in Israel two and a half thousand years ago that could almost have been written yesterday. It condemns half-heartedness, pride and hypocrisy, things that are all too apparent in the church today. The Israelites were by no means the only people that have lost sight of God and turned aside from his ways. It is all too easy to stray, and oh so hard to turn back.

Yet that is God's call, always: 'Turn back to me, and I will turn back to you.' Or rather: 'Turn back to me, and you will realise I never turned away from you.' We see that call in Malachi halfway through chapter three.

But the Israelites didn't see it like this. If you remember, they equated 'chosen' with 'righteous', which meant (rather conveniently) that all their problems were for God to sort out, something he would do once and for all on that day.

They looked forward to the 'day of the Lord', because on that day they expected God to crush their enemies, set his people free, once and for all, and live with them again. They knew that they were chosen, they thought that meant they were righteous, and therefore they thought they would receive a reward on the 'day of the Lord'.

The prophets however knew otherwise. Almost with one voice they condemned the people's foolishness and optimism. In Amos 5 the prophet says this: 'Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light.' (v.18)

The prophets recognised, by God's inspiration, what the people did not. The people themselves were arrogant and evildoers. They were unfaithful, corrupt and hypocritical – and therefore they were in danger of God's consuming fire. 'Don't look forward to the day of the Lord,' the prophets said, 'because on that day you will be punished for your wickedness.'

Rather than being spared because they were God's chosen people, they would be punished even more harshly, for failing to live up to the special responsibility that came with being God's chosen people. The prophets understood that being chosen meant 'special responsibility', not 'no responsibility'.

The people of Israel had been chosen for a special task, as a 'light to the nations'. God revealed himself to them, revealed his name and what he was like, and their task was to be a shining example to the world, to bring glory to God's name. They were to do this by 'revering' God's name, as it says at the end of chapter three.

(As an aside, in the Hebrew Bible, there is no chapter four, but chapter three is six verses longer. The continuity between chapters three and four in our versions is therefore extremely strong.)

'Revering God's name' means regular worship, whole-hearted and generous. It means faithfulness to God (not having any idols, following his desires and not our own) and faithfulness to each other (carrying through promises, being loving and kind). It means honouring God with material possessions – giving back to him what he first gave to us.

‘Revering God’s name’ means doing everything so that if people see it they praise God. It means living every part of your life as if your life depended on it. It means causing people to associate good things with God and his people, not bad things: humility not pride, love not arrogance, faithfulness not hypocrisy.

It means doing your best, not offering God second best.

At the end of chapter three, we read that there were indeed some in Israel who revered God’s name, and therefore who would be spared God’s wrath. All Israel would perish for its sin, but the few who remain faithful would be spared. Those who had not ignored their responsibility would be rewarded.

In verse two of our passage, God promises that, on those who are faithful and revere his name, the ‘sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.’ And in verse three he promises them victory over the wicked (which, incidentally, includes great swathes of their fellow Israelites).

The day of the Lord will be a great and terrible day, promises Malachi. It isn’t something that the people should look forward to, it’s something they should dread.

Malachi's final word is that the day will not come entirely without warning. God will send a prophet before the day comes, to prepare the people; he will send a prophet like Elijah. Think about Elijah. He was persecuted by Jezebel, who hunted down and killed all the other prophets in Israel. The whole country had abandoned God and forsaken the covenant. He alone was left as a voice calling the people back to God. He alone was left to face God's enemies. Elijah is God's disaster recovery expert, the stubborn loner who trusted in God because there was nowhere else to turn.

So when God promised that he would send Elijah to them, on the one hand it would have been encouraging, because it meant God would send one of his greatest prophets to his people; but on the other hand it must have been extremely disheartening that the situation would be so bad that Elijah is the one who has to be sent.

Now think about John the Baptist. There had been no prophet for four hundred years. Malachi's final prophecy resounded through the centuries, heightening expectation and longing in God's chosen people. The people clung to the written word in desperation. The Pharisees encouraged people to study and learn what God had been saying to them in the past.

But their focus on the written word was causing them to forget the God who had inspired that word, whose Spirit had inspired the prophets. Then came John, wearing camel hair and a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey. The whispers began, they spread like wildfire, until the whisper became a roar across the land of Israel: ‘Elijah has come! The prophet has come!’ Feel the excitement they felt.

John the Baptist called the people to repentance, called them to turn back to God, as the prophets had done centuries earlier. He baptised them with water, always pointing them to the one who would come after him. Jesus himself admitted that John was the promised Elijah, come to prepare the people for the day of the Lord, just as Malachi had promised.

But that begs the question: when was the day of the Lord? It is now two thousand years later, and things don’t seem to have changed that much. Surely the announcement wasn’t centuries, millennia, before the actual event?

Well, it was and it wasn’t – a typical theologian’s answer! As Christians, we believe that the day of the Lord was Good Friday. On that day, God dealt with the problem and power of evil, as Jesus took it onto himself and was crucified. The power of evil



was broken as Jesus' body was broken on the cross.

Yet there is still evil in the world. Although God broke the power of evil, he did not destroy it utterly. Although his kingdom is coming, it has not fully arrived yet. That is all still to come. The final day of the Lord will be when Jesus returns, to judge and save the world, to make good the defeat of darkness he achieved on Good Friday.

So what will that day hold for us? Malachi warned the Israelites not to look forward to it, because it would bring punishment and not reward. They had broken God's covenant with them, and so deserved punishment. But what about us, as Christians? Should we be dreading Jesus' return?

A thousand times, no! We will welcome him with open arms. Jesus' return will herald a great feast, a wedding banquet for all who belong to him. Jesus' return will fulfil the last of the prophecies, and will be the start of our everlasting life with our Lord.

You see, the new covenant is sealed by Jesus' blood, not by our own promises, so quickly broken. The cost of the new covenant is entirely one-sided, and that cost has already been paid. It isn't

dependent on what we do, but on what he did, once and for all.

And as his brothers and sisters, we get all the benefits of what he achieved, for free! God offers us new life in Jesus freely, with no strings attached. This is the message of Easter, the message of hope that the prophets could never quite see. For Jesus didn't stay dead, but rose again to new life.

The new covenant was sealed by his blood, and made powerful to all eternity by his resurrection from the dead.

Do you remember how the Israelites wrongly thought that they would be spared the punishment of the wicked simply because they were God's chosen people? The reason was that their covenant with God required them to do certain things, or they would have broken it.

However, we cannot break the new covenant, because we don't have to do anything! And God can't break it, because he's already done everything. As God's chosen people, following him because of Jesus, we will be spared God's punishment, because the punishment has already been borne – by Jesus. I will say this again:

The new covenant isn't dependent on what we do, but on what Jesus did, once and for all.

That's why I skipped over verse four earlier. In it Malachi encourages his fellow Israelites to stay faithful to the Law, which will help them revere God's name, and so save them from his wrath.

But we don't need to do anything to save ourselves from God's wrath, because Jesus did it for us. We simply trust that what Jesus did is enough; we show that trust by not trying earn God's favour, or anyone else's for that matter.

So does that mean we can do whatever we like, like the Israelites thought they could? By no means! What good would it be to respond to God's loving grace with more wickedness? Revering God's name is the appropriate response to what God has done for us in Jesus. Remember how we described that earlier?

'Revering God's name' means regular, whole-hearted and generous worship. It means faithfulness to God and to each other. It means honouring God with material possessions.

'Revering God's name' means doing everything so that if people

see it they praise God. It means living every part of your life as if your life depended on it. It means acting with humility not pride, love not arrogance, faithfulness not hypocrisy.

It means doing your best, not offering God second best.

As Jesus' followers, we revere his name by living as he did: in faithfulness, humility, love and so on. And instead of fearing his return, we welcome the day of our Lord as the day when we shall see him face-to-face, and know him as we are known. I for one can't wait.