



# The New Shofar

November 5<sup>th</sup> 2017 – Ordinary Sunday 31

Malachi 1:14-2:10 - Matthew 23:1-12

## Malachi and the compromise of Judaism

### Historical Setting.

The year is around 430 BC a time of great frustration and disillusionment for the people of Israel and it was to this world the Book of Malachi was. Almost 90 years before this time, the Temple had been re-built by the exiles returning from the Babylonian captivity and we have the 'third wave' of returning exiles led by Nehemiah. The Persian King Artaxerxes 1 gave permission for this group to return in 445 BC (15 years before the writing of this book).

**There was every reason for the people to be hopeful:** The picture is positive – The temple has been re-built (516) the city walls have been re-built (445), the priesthood has been re-established and sacrifices have re-commenced at the temple. They are reasonably secure from their enemies and there was no reason for not presuming this would continue.

**But the people were without a faithful leadership:** Despite all of this we find a corrupt priesthood (Mal 1:6-8), ordained servants of the Covenant who were accepting the poorest of the herd or flock for sacrifice – against the instructions of Leviticus 3 – and a people who had allowed themselves to submit to a 'form of religion' rather than *the relationship* The Lord God had called them to have. Intermarriage with the heathen tribes was common but against the commands of God – *it lead to idolatry and to pagan wives being abandoned to lives of poverty.*

**Inevitably, God is pushed to the margins of their daily living:** The whole nation, led by the priests had allowed themselves to become disillusioned and cynical. The natural outcome of this state of mind leads to daily worship becoming something of a chore, a job that requires to be done – rather than being a passion to praise, worship and serve God. This sets the stage for the ministry of the prophet Malachi.

## What does Malachi have to do with our Church today?

The Jews of the time believed they had done all God had asked of them upon their return from exile. Their woes can be put under three headings – **Boredom** – We have done all we have been asked and the rest is up to others – **Apathy** – religious/Church commitments and worship are things we just get out of the way so the rest of the time is ours – **Rebelliousness** – we want all the non-believers around us have and be free to live as they live (*be like the other nations*).

Add to these elements we can add **Proverbs' 29:18 warning** '*Where there is no vision, the people perish...*' How much of Israel's problems outlined by Malachi reflect situations in our own Church today? Tease out Malachi's responses and translate them into our times.

What do we expect of our spiritual leaders – parish and national? Are we receiving it? **AND** comment on the three headings above as they offer challenges to our own faith communities. How might we go about addressing some of these failings – using the prophesy of Malachi.

## ***They do not practice what they preach...***

The condemnation by Jesus of the leaders of Judaism of his time is abrupt, clear and frightening. They are accused of being very good at saying one thing and then going off and doing another. They were preaching the Law but then putting a whole range of burdens (traditions) on people wanting to find God. The point Jesus was making is the way their personal religious beliefs, their behaviour, their public persona and their failures were keeping people away from God.

This is a very important but subtle point. The Gospels all talk about the need to give witness to the person and message of Jesus, to all God's saving gifts and the divine will. But implied in this as well, is the need to avoid harming the Gospel by giving negative witnesses. We can do this by the things we say and do – rudeness, gossip, pride, arrogance and as well when we ignore people, fail to *clothe the naked, feed the hungry, assist the orphan and widow, embrace the refugee, forgive the sinner, search out the lonely, take in the dispossessed, etc.* It is all there in the Gospel of Matthew. Fail in these things and the world looks on and rightly accuse Christians of being hypocrites.

***the greatest among you will be your servant...***How do we understand this as applying to our own faith community (not just our clergy)? i.e. Is it meant for all of us or only our “leaders”?

***but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach...*** How might we apply this to our own lives and our own faith community? Imagine those outside of our Church looking in. How might they be assessing us? How might we go about bringing our living in line with our teaching.

### **The priority of religious activities over discipleship:**

The Scribes and Pharisees are condemned here by Jesus because they sought to control who was and who was not to be accepted as a *righteous* Jew. The point was that each group had a different set of demands – the Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Which one was correct? Who do the people obey and what about those who pursue an alternative vision? Matthew's point is addressed to the Judaism emerging after the 70 AD destruction of the Temple. The fight to be the successors of the Pharisees pushed God and faithful living to one side as they battled for the role of leader. They sought to create a people who were spiritually superior to the others; more learned, more spiritual and closer to God. Jesus is teaching that Christians and faith communities instead needed to be living lives of service, of humility, lives that imitated the words and deeds of Jesus that others may know God.

***How do we see the fundamental role of religious system and practices?*** In what ways do our own religious practices help or hinder others coming to know Jesus? How might we go about reflecting upon them with a view to keeping them alive, potent, missionary and spiritually helpful?

***All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*** Jesus said this to his disciples and it was given as a negative judgment on the Jewish leaders. It leaves believers today with a question: *has the Church been to exalted (or sought exaltation) in the past, such that it is now going through a stage of being humbled by God? What might this Gospel be calling us to be doing? If the world is ignoring the Church and even mocking Christian teachings, what might Matthew be offering to us as a way to address this contemporary situation?*

**In both readings,** disciples are being told how they are to live - with an attitude of humble service of both God and their fellow men and women as their priority, even if it meant that they had to change their religious ways. As God dismantled the old religious systems of Israel that were no longer functioning as they should have been working he replaced them with his Son. So too today, every religious system need to be re-thought in the light of their fundamental roles: giving praise to God, revealing the Kingdom to the world, witnessing the Kingdom in action and assisting people in growing their intimacy of their relationship with God. Religion, in Matthew's presentation, is only of value as long as it supports and encourages the growth of the spiritual life (the imitation of Christ).