

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
REMEMBRANCE DAY SUNDAY
SUNDAY 13 NOVEMBER 2016
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Malachi 4, Psalm 98, Luke 21:5-19**



“Hope”

Our first reading this morning has been from the book of Malachi and he is one of what are called the “minor” prophets we find at the end of the Old Testament. They are called minor, not because they are less important, but because their books are short and their dates a little bit later than the other, “major” prophets. Malachi is the very last book of those last books and the chapter we’ve read today is what finishes the Jewish bible. The name Malachi comes from the Hebrew Mal’akhiy, meaning “my messenger” or “my angel. The book was most probably written in the post-exilic period, after the reconstruction and dedication of the second temple, probably during the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. Behind the book is a world of trouble and disappointment. After they returned from exile, with dreams and high ideals about the way they would rebuild Jerusalem and reshape their lives as the people of God, the people found it difficult to make these dreams and ideals come true. The reality has been one of infighting, conflict, abuse of power and practices of social injustice. It is against this abuse and practices of injustice that Malachi writes his prophecies, bitterly accusing the leadership in Jerusalem and issuing a warning that God’s righteous judgment will strike those who have failed to make things work.

Reading this text and reflecting on it in the week before Remembrance Day, I wondered if it would have been like the disappointment after the idealism after the first world war, and then after the second world war failed to translate into a world where there was peace and prosperity for all. People who had fought hard, convinced that they would rebuild and reshape the future in a way that had no resemblance to the past, discovering that they return to the same old conflict and strife that was there before. It is in that context that Malachi says: “See the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evil doers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, so that it will neither leave root nor branch....But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall...” I don’t know if you’ve ever seen calves go out from the stall in spring, but I have. Calves leaving the stall for the first time are extraordinarily happy, and their antics, their jumping and running and playing around is very infectious and an expression of uncomplicated joy. It is that image that Malachi uses for the day of judgement. It is not a negative image! It is an image of hope and happiness for those who have lived the dream, who have held on to their ideals. For them, Malachi says, the sun of righteousness will rise, with healing in its wings. It’s a promise. A promise that the arrogant and evildoers who have made everything go to pot will burn up, and be like stubble after a fire. With nothing but a smoking memory left...

Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, says Malachi, the statutes and ordinances I commanded him at Horeb. And remember Elijah, he will come again and make things right, turn people towards each other again, so I will not come and strike the land with a curse. You’ll be jumping around like calves in spring, because things will turn out right, God will come with healing in his wings, and the bad guys, the arrogant evil doers who have brought injustice and suffering to God’s people, they will go up in smoke! Remember Moses and look for Elijah!

That’s how the Old Testament finishes, and, really, how the New Testament then begins. The gospels portray John the Baptist as the returned Elijah, and portray Jesus as the new Moses, rising with healing in his wings, bringing joy to the world, with angel messengers, malachi, announcing his arrival in the world. It’s here, say the gospels, what Malachi prophesied would be happening, is here. Healing, judgement, the

wicked falling, the evil doers exposed and turned to stubble. The Lord has come! Hark the herald angels sing!

Jesus the fulfilment of those hopes and dreams that had died so many times before, defying the forces of evil and death by rising again, with healing in his wings. Two thousand years later, we may wonder what has come of that, how much that gospel, that good news has materialised, has become reality, has managed to take shape in people's lives, in the world as a whole. Or if we are still in the days Jesus announces in Luke 21, the same days Malachi looked forward to in his prophesying, the days of the burning oven, of not a stone being left upon another, of wars and insurrections, of nations rising against nations, kingdom against kingdom, great earthquakes and famines, of dreadful portents and great signs, of persecution and betrayal, of hatred and devastation. Or is it perhaps that these things have happened, have been happening, again and again in the last 21 centuries and more? That it is not one event Malachi or Jesus are referring to, one future cataclysmic event they see coming, but an ongoing, never ending cycle of disappointment, disillusion and devastation?

Some were looking at the temple, it says in Luke, how beautiful it was, adorned with precious stones and gifts dedicated to God. And we may assume that they must have felt reassurance at the sight, like we might do when we look at the achievements of our culture and civilization. They must have thought that all was well, that whatever might happen, that there at least would be something that would remain standing, that was solid and secure. Nothing is secure, says Jesus, not a stone will be left upon the other... the day will come, burning like an oven, says Malachi.... Ominous words, scary images, anxiety inducing language that, in the days after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, will sound all too familiar to those of us who read the papers, follow the news or are connected to Facebook.

That the only certainty about the future is uncertain rings probably more true to most people's minds now than it has for a while. I think we have all realised this week how fragile some of the brilliance and certainties of our times are, and how easily what is seemingly solid can change into something else. We have realised how the warnings of the possibility of a day of judgement and reckoning loom on the horizon, over the powers, the principalities. Although the arrogant and evildoers that Malachi and Jesus prophesied would come in their day could be on the horizon for us as well, I think we need to realise that the message of neither Malachi or Jesus was one of doom, gloom, threat and devastation for their world or for ours. Their words of judgement were directed towards those who were in the business of destroying the dream, of working against God's will and intentions for the world. In Malachi's days, as in Jesus' day, and in the days of the early Christians that Luke wrote for, they were words of comfort, words of assurance that the devastation and destruction that people saw happening all around them, was not going to be the end of the story.

There is another story that would continue to be told, the story of righteousness rising with healing in its wings, the story of angels singing another song from heaven, the news of another king, come to reign in another way, subverting and counteracting, resisting and reshaping the world even as dreadful portents and signs were everywhere. Somewhere in apocalyptic literature, of which both the words from Malachi and those from the gospel of Luke we read this morning are part, it says that in all the oftentimes terrifying drama of this world, in all the disappointments and disillusionment of history repeating itself, again and again, somewhere in the middle of all those who will tell you they are the Messiah but are not, there is another power at work. A power of love and generosity, of peace and care, of wholeness and unity among people.

All who revere God's name, all who follow in Jesus' footsteps and testify to the gospel, and live according to God's dreaming and intention for this world, over them God will spread his wings, finding Jesus beside them and the Spirit hovering over them. They will find the trust and faith that is needed to keep their integrity in the midst of other forces and different powers that seek to pull them away. All we need to do, no matter who thinks they are in charge, or who makes out that they can get away with injustice and abuse, is stick with it. Stick with God, stick with Jesus, and follow the path he followed with integrity. Obstinate resist whatever it is that takes away from the wholeness, healing and peace of this world and

its people, continuing to work in any which way we can with the force for love and life that we know to be at work among us to make it grow, in our day and for the future, now and always.
Amen.

Internet resources:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malachi>

<http://www.behindthename.com/name/malachi>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylonian_captivity

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx>

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3059

<http://www.davidlose.net/2016/11/pentecost-26-c-joy-in-november/>

<http://www.davidlose.net/2016/11/good-government/>