

"WHEN THE LORD COMES"

TEXT: "The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of Hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire."

INTRODUCTION If I were to ask you to raise your hands if you have heard those words before, I'm sure that a great many hands would go up. Not only have you heard them spoken on other occasions, but you heard them sung earlier in this service. If I then asked you to tell me where they come from, my guess is that you would say, "Why....they come from Handel's Messiah". And so they do, and it's almost impossible for us to think of those words apart from the music. At least, this is true in my own case. I know I cannot hear those words without thinking and hearing in my own mind that beautiful melody to which Handel set them.

THE SOURCE Handel found those words in the last book of the Old Testament. Remember the name of that book? It's a short book; one you might easily overlook. It's called Malachi. The book of Malachi was not the last book in the Old Testament to be written. Daniel was written almost three hundred years later. The books of the Old Testament were not arranged according to chronological composition. Genesis was not the first book written. The material was arranged on the basis of subject matter, and Malachi, I suspect, was placed last because in a sense, it closed the old order and looked toward the new.

And Malachi, we are told, is not the name of the man who wrote the book. It is the Hebrew word for 'messenger'. No one knows who the writer was. And we shall speak of him as Malachi because that sounds like a good Hebrew name for a man. There are at least three interesting things about the writer that we can infer from what he wrote. I am going to put them before you because they have something to say to us - to our time and the life we live.

PERIOD OF DISENCHANTMENT The first thing we know is that he lived in a period, and at a time in history that might best be described as a period of disenchantment. He lived about 450 B. C..

Let me describe the circumstances of that time. The long period of exile was over. The Jews had returned from Babylon and had resettled in their own land. The Temple had been rebuilt. The sacrificial cult of worship was in full swing. The days of enforced exile in Babylon had come to an end and yet some had stayed on there apparently becoming accustomed to the profitable and comfortable living. And those who did return to Palestine found the land was not as fertile as they had remembered it. It was rocky. There were periods of drought when the crops failed completely. Life was hard for them.

Under these hard circumstances, the life of the people began to sag in the middle. This is likely to happen when people realize that things aren't quite as bright as they had expected them to be. When dreams of the future are not confirmed by realities of the present.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

COFFEE HOUR

I would remind you that coffee will be served in Fellowship Hall to which all of you are invited.

GREETING

Seldom is there a Sunday across the year that we do not have visitors in our congregation - friends from other parts of the city, and other parts of the country - worshipping with us. We take this opportunity to welcome you. We hope that we may have opportunity to greet you in a more personal way - either at the door or at the coffee hour. We call upon you to leave your name and city address with us. We have friends from far and near because they have taken time to do this, and we hope you will do the same.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The announcements are listed for you in the bulletin. You will note that pledge cards are still coming in. If you have not yet turned yours into the church office, we call upon you to do it today. We would like to complete the Canvass before Christmas and get the 1965 offering envelopes out to you. This we plan to do next Sunday.

Today following this service an opportunity for you to witness to East Harlem Protestant Parish program in operation will be given to you. This is a unique thrust of the church that has gained a great deal of attention over the year across our land. Those of you who would like to see one aspect of the East Harlem Protestant Parish program are invited to gether in the east vestible immediately following the service. Dr. Brewster, Chairman of our Commission on Missions, is heading up the program.

JESUS SAID: "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.

CARELESS For one thing, they were careless about their religious duties. They were suppose to bring the best animal they had and sacrifice it to God as a gift, but many of them would bring an animal that was either blind or diseased - the poorest one they had. Malachi saw what was going on and it disturbed him. What concerned him principally was what it revealed about the man who made the offering. It revealed that the people were not willing to give their best to God. And, if they could somehow avoid the tithes that the Temple required of them, they did. Some there are in the Temples and Churches of our land who today follow their example.

They were even careless about their moral behavior. They divorced their wives for no reason at all and married other more attractive women from foreign countries. And they often ignored their children and paid little attention to the poor and needy. What was still more significant was that there was an air of skepticism and doubt among the people. They were asking questions, questions like these: if God loves us, how can he let things like this happen? Our dreams of the future were so grand, but look at them now - shattered. If there is any justice, if there is any reason or meaning, why aren't the good and evil in life more equally distributed? Why, they asked, after all this hope that was kept alive in us - why is the land so dry, and life so full of disappointment?

As we look back across the centuries (it's almost 25 centuries now), to the days of Malachi, it's almost like looking into a mirror. We see ourselves and the times in which we live. The Second World War has been over almost twenty years now. That period of exile for many ended in 1945. We have been back to normal for a long time. During this period of time, religion has appeared to be thriving - at least in terms of attendance and activity. All across our land there is prosperity - building, development, roads, schools, housing.

And yet, one often has the feeling that something is missing. The influence of the church is not nearly as great as it ought to be. To be sure, churches are larger than ever, but the people in them don't seem to have grown very much. And the morality of the people in the world does not seem to be increasing in strength or in depth. By morality, I mean human relationships in every conceivable direction. Morality, in that sense, is not rising, but falling. And there is an air of skepticism. People not only are doubting the existence of God and the validity of value judgments and experience, but they are also wondering silently and quietly whether there is any meaning at all in life. It may not be spoken, or expressed verbally in so many words - but mind you, it's there.

It's worth remembering that there have been times like this before - times when there was no great crisis (thank God for that), and yet - no great burst of creativity. This is the first thing that we record about Malachi.

He lived in a period of history very much like ours: a period of disenchantment.

HE LIVED THROUGH THAT PERIOD

The second thing that is worth thinking about is that Malachi lived through this period of disenchantment without ever becoming disenchanted himself. He did not lose his faith in God; he did not lose his faith in the justice and the love of God. He was able to discern why things were happening the way they were; he tried to show the people the reasons why. He would raise one of their questions, and then he would try to answer it.

Now Malachi did not have the great eloquence of an Isaiah or a Jeremiah. There is nothing in Malachi such as one reads in portions of Isaiah. He didn't have the gift of eloquence. He didn't have a voice like Amos, or Micah, or Hosea. They were magnificent voices. However, he used the voice he had. It was a good voice; it was on the right track, and he represented those in the community who, in spite of all the frustrations and disappointments that hit them from time to time, nevertheless were faithful. They were not disenchanted, even though they lived at a time when it was difficult from becoming disenchanted.

There are Malachi's today. There isn't a Luther or a Wesley among us, but there are many Malachis - good men and good women who are not permitting themselves to become disenchanted with the time in which we live, who are not willing to give up, who are willing to speak out. Remember that in a period of spiritual depression. There are some who are not depressed.

GOD WAS GOING TO DO SOMETHING

The third and last thing that we know about Malachi is doubtless the most important thing of all. He thought God was going to do something. He believed in a God who could do things. In this case, he believed that God was going to come to his temple. "The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to his Temple".

Then there comes that fierce question. The music is so beautiful in Handel's setting of the Messiah that I fear we do not fully grasp the meaning of it. "The Lord is coming. But who may abide the day of his coming. And who shall stand when he appeareth?" "For he is like a refiner's fire". In other words, who can endure his coming and face the day of his arrival. He is not coming to soothe you, or comfort you, or protect you, or insure you against every calamity of life. He is coming to refine your life. He is coming to burn out the baser metals so that the silver that is there can shine through. And this, as you know, can be a painful process.

We know what this is like in many different areas of life. We know that a surgeon often has to remove a diseased organ before the body can be well. None of us like to go through that, but there are times when we have to. We know, too, that a person often has to root out a poisonous fear, or jealousy, or lust, or selfishness before he can be made well, healthy, and a mature person. And a nation has to be purged of internal hatred and bitterness before it can be strong. There are no two ways about it; it has to happen.

This is auster. We don't like to hear it. We say, "That's the Old Testament. In the New Testament, God is love, not judgment."

Things did not happen exactly the way Malachi thought they would. When the Lord came, he didn't come suddenly to the temple in a blaze of fire. When he came, he came quietly in a stable as a little baby. He grew up in an unimportant town of Galilee as a boy in a normal family. When he finally did come into his mature life and ministry, he didn't burn people up, but rather he lighted them up and in him people could see and feel and experience the power of God and love of God in a unique way. All of this was quite different from Malachi's forecast of the future.

But after you have said all that, can you say that there is no judgment in that love? Is there any love, even in a purely human framework - is there any love that means anything that is totally without judgment? Is there any love of a parent for a child that is totally lacking in what we call judgment - that desire to refine the life of the child the parent loves? In the love of a husband or wife, is there no judgment of the other person. Love without judgment is indulgence. Judgment without love is cruelty.

Some of you may recall that the last parable of Matthew's Gospel is a parable about judgment - the coming of the Son of Man to separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep on the right hand enter into life simply because they have done the things which he did for people. And the goats on his left hand go to destruction and waste because they have not done for people the things he did.

You see - you cannot get away from it. There comes a time when the Lord comes to every human being. (Whatever you call him or whatever you think about him. You may not like this Biblical language) But whatever language you use, the fact remains the same: there are times when the Lord comes - like a father - to help, heal, protect, encourage, comfort, to give you the strength to carry on. And there are times when he comes like a refiner's fire because there are things in you that have to be rooted out before you can be the kind of person you were meant to be. This is painful. There is always fire in the Father's love, and the Father's love is always in the fire.

CLOSING Remember then these three things about these words: They were written by a man we know nothing about except that he lived in a time of disillusionment. Remember how well he weathered the prolonged period of low pressure and take heart. And then remember that the power of God comes sooner or later into a life - to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.

LET US PRAY As we prepare the way for thy coming, O God, clear our minds of our prejudices and preconceived ideas so that thou mayest enter our thoughts as well as our hearts. Help us to accept the fact that every real father has to make judgments, and that there are things in us and in our way of life that must be refined. Give us the courage, O God, to accept these things as facts, to rise to them as responsible people, to shoulder our share of the burden, and move on with high hopes. Amen.