

JOHN B TAYLOR

And He Shall Purify: an Exposition of Malachi Chapters Two and Three

At a time when models of clerical distinctiveness are out of fashion, John B. Taylor challenges the prevailing mood. He sees in Malachi's prophetic reiteration of the covenant to Levi an enduring pattern for the marks of the church and its ministers, and a reminder of the reforms that would honour God now as then.

I instinctively turn to the Old Testament for my theme, partly because it is less familiar and partly because I want to try to demonstrate its relevance to a Christian congregation. And I choose the book of Malachi because he has things to say to the leaders of the church, as well as to the church at large, at a time of financial stringency.

The context in which Malachi spoke is described in the last chapter of Nehemiah where he wrote (Neh. 13:10):

I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them; so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. So I remonstrated with the officials and said "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine and oil into the storehouses.

The logic of the situation was obvious. The people of God needed to offer worship. Worship needed trained professionals to devote themselves to it. The Levitical priests were those people. They, in, turn were dependent for their livelihood on the gifts of the whole community. The people were not giving as they were expected to. The Levites had to return home in order to maintain themselves and their families. The worship of the temple was in a state of chaos.

What was the root cause of the problem?

It may be that the people could not afford to pay their clergy. It may equally have been that the Levites did not appear to justify their stipends. Where was the fault? In the tight-fisted laity or in the indolent clergy? This was the dilemma addressed by Malachi in this little book. It is one faced by the chairmen of many a diocesan board of finance today as we wrestle with our own financial problems. Is it that

the people can't pay or that they won't pay? Is there an unseen factor which we call pastoral breakdown? And the clergy, aware of this debate, become increasingly pressured and insecure, so much so that in Malachi's day at any rate they had reached the stage of questioning cynicism about almost everything.

When Malachi began his oracle on a positive, reassuring note (Mal. 1:2) – 'I have loved you, says the Lord' – they replied without hesitation 'Huh!'. The word isn't actually there in the Hebrew, but it's implied in the answer 'How hast thou loved us?' Prove it. After what we have been through, it will take more than four glib words to convince us that God does love us and has chosen us and has a good purpose for us. We need more than words.

So Malachi abandons the honeyed words of God's love and talks straight to the priests of his day. 'Now this command is for you, O priests. If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honour my name, says the Lord Almighty, I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings' (Mal. 2:1). That is very strong language with which to address the clergy. No bishop would dare talk like that. We prefer the softly, softly approach, more of the persuasive and less of the confrontational. But then our second name is not Malachi!

The reason he laid it on the line in such uncompromising tones was, as he put it in verse four of chapter two, 'You shall know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may hold.' In other words, I want you to know that I, the Lord, am totally committed to these Levites and I am determined that my purposes for them are not going to be frustrated by you or by anyone else.

Which brings us to the key phrase, 'covenant with Levi' (Mal. 2:4). That can have only one meaning. It is the arrangement, the settlement, that Yahweh has made with his people that a chosen tribe has been set aside from the population to be the designated leaders of worship and for much more beside. As a covenant, it represents the principle of a part for the whole. Some are set apart so that all may be blessed. And only if the some play their part and fulfil their calling, can the all receive the benefits. It follows that the some need the all to enable them to concentrate on God's word and worship.

Now it seems to me that Christian ministry down the ages has been based on that principle of the covenant with Levi to which Malachi draws our attention. Yes, the principle has been widened out. Yes, we can think of ourselves as a royal priesthood, a kingdom of priests, the priesthood of all believers. But the focus of the ministry of the new covenant is in essence fully comparable with the focus of the ministry of the old covenant, namely the covenant with Levi. And God says through Malachi that he is totally committed to it and is determined to make it succeed. He will not allow the internal questionings of the priests or their resultant slackness and slovenliness (to say nothing of the people's disillusionment with them) to deface what is essentially a very good thing, and necessary to the people's health.

The purpose of the covenant with Levi

So Malachi reminds his readers what God's intention was in establishing the covenant with Levi. 'My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and

I gave them to him, that he might fear, and he feared me and stood in awe of my name' (Mal. 2:5). The three qualities which the covenant was designed to achieve were life, peace and fear. The three hallmarks of effective Christian ministry today.

Life – *hayyim*, a plural word expressive of vitality, movement, growth. Bubbling, pulsating life, like the Greek *zoe*, beloved of St John and meaning 'life abundant', eternal life but here and now, not just tucked away in a heavenly future.

Peace – *shalom*, a word implying good relationships, promises kept, everything functioning well, people relating to each other, and so discovering that inner serenity which can only come to us when all our lines to others are unblocked and untangled. *Shalom*, well-being within the covenant community, is very much a relationship word.

Fear – *mora* – the reverence for God that inspires worship and keeps the heart submissive, awesome, often silent before the holiness and majesty of God.

Now are these not the three ingredients we long to see in our churches today? A sense of God that marks our worship and leads to longings for holiness (*mora*). Good relationships within the congregation, with no rifts, no animosities, no divisions; a place of peace (*shalom*). But not the peace of somnolence or inactivity, rather a peace where life is for ever bubbling like an unstoppable spring welling up and out throughout the community (*hayyim*). That is why God established the covenant with Levi and he is determined that it should succeed – in our day as well as in Malachi's.

The minister's task

So much for the intention behind the church's ministry. Now for the task of the minister. 'True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts' (Mal. 2:6). Summed up very crudely, this is saying that his task is to be a teacher, a walker and a turner. Let us look at those in turn.

A teacher. God's ministers deal in *torah*, instruction, and *da'ath*, knowledge. They really do need to know their speciality and be able to communicate it. Clergy are not simply vehicles of benevolence. They have to know God's law, understand it, apply it, interpret it, and to be a repository of divine knowledge – knowing both the word of God and the ways of God. For this training is essential and so is continuing education. Theology is a must, not an addendum. We cannot afford to be without an educated clergy, and the more highly educated the better. And side by side with the teaching ability must go an *attractiveness* so that men and women should seek instruction from their mouths, and *consistency* – 'no wrong was found on his lips' (Mal 2:6). A tall order indeed.

Secondly, a walker. Someone who walks with me in peace and uprightness. There was a time when religious bookshops were full of little classics about maintaining the spiritual glow, manuals of devotion, quiet talks on this and that. Now they are only found in dusty second-hand bins at ten pence a time. I have a

favourite, published in 1902, written by A. W. Robinson and entitled *The Personal Life of the Clergy*. It is chock-full of good sense, including a chapter (unusual for the period) on the dangers of secularisation. Robinson defined this as:

the temptation which would lead us to devote ourselves to a variety of pursuits other than those which properly belong to us, to such an extent as to obscure our character and weaken our influence as spiritual leaders.

When did we last hear secularisation described in those terms? Maybe we have to relearn the vital importance of the daily walk with God, that inner, personal contact with our Lord, without which we become arid and formal and professional and dead.

And a turner. Yes, because the priest is a converter, an evangelist, a turner of many from iniquity. Of course, this is not exclusively the priest's role: it is for all the people of God to be engaged in. But do not the priests have a privileged place in dealing with people's sins, in absolution, in counselling, in reconciling them to God, to say nothing of their pulpit ministry? So Malachi gives us for our instruction these three key aspects of the task of the ministers in God's church – to teach the faith and interpret the tradition, to live a life of holiness and uprightness, and to impact upon their people to their eternal benefit.

That is what should have happened. The truth however was very different, justifying those strong words at the beginning of chapter two about sending curses upon them and cursing their blessings. For how did the priests behave? How did they use their privileged position? 'You have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi' (Mal. 2:8). Instead of turning others, they have themselves turned aside and departed from the way. Instead of enlightening and enriching with their use of *torah*, they have caused people to stumble. They have misled them and confused them and caused offence. The Hebrew word *kashal* means literally to stagger, to totter, to stumble. Small children and old people do it; so do drunk people and sick people, and sometimes blind people too. But woe to those who cause them to come crashing down. Remember the harsh words Jesus used for those who make a little one fall: 'it were better for you...' (Matt. 18:6).

Failure and reform

The scandal of clergy who fail in their duties and fall short of the high calling to which they are ordained is that they have 'corrupted the covenant with Levi'. The whole of the priesthood, the whole life of the church, is brought down by the failures of the few. The blessings are indeed cursed. What then can be done?

Malachi makes it clear that there is something the priests themselves can do about it. 'Now, O priests, this command is for you'. Twice in verse 2 there comes the phrase 'If you do not lay it to heart'. If you do not listen. This is where reformation begins, when the seriousness of the problem is recognised and the urgent need for something to be done about it is acknowledged. It is for lack of this seriousness, lack of this concern, lack of the spirit of penitence that the prophet utters God's threats against his servants. Reformation begins when the people of God, and particularly the priests of God, begin to listen afresh to him, to discern

the signs of the times and to carry a deep concern upon their hearts. I am not entirely sure if I see that in our church today, or am I wrong?

God too can do something. For the climax of Malachi's prophecy is leading up to the opening words of chapter three 'Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight' (Mal. 3:1). There must be more than a touch of irony about these words. The Lord whom you seek? The messenger in whom you delight? A little more of that delight and that seeking after God might have rendered chapter two less necessary!

But the chief function of the messianic messenger is expressed in verse 2, 'He will purify the sons of Levi' (Mal. 3:3). That is where the cleansing, cauterising process needs to begin. With the leaders of the people of God. Malachi does not say how this purification will be effected, but he does give two clues in the similes he calls upon to describe the process: a refiner's fire and fuller's soap. The second of these is easier to understand than the first. We are more into laundering than smelting.

The art of fulling was important in ancient Israel because of the sheer cost of clothing and the need to cleanse the fibres in the cloth before the process of dyeing was begun. Fulling took place outside the town by or in a river, if this were possible, where there were some flat stones on which the cloth could be trampled underfoot. The Hebrew word 'fuller' is literally a 'trampler'. Alternatively, the cloth was spread out in as much water as could be found and beaten with stones to produce a similar result. The clothes were then laid out to dry and bleach in the sun, and we have references in 2 Kings and Isaiah to one such place near Jerusalem called the Fuller's Field. This battering process was often assisted by the use of *borith*, soap or lye, extracted from plant ash by burning the soda plant to produce a solution of potash (potassium carbonate) and sodium carbonate, which acted as a simple detergent. It would not have been particularly easy on the hands or on the feet, but it had to be done – a gruelling pummelling which was the only way that cleansing and bleaching could be achieved.

The refiner's fire was even more discomfiting. In this simile, the smith or the metalworker operated over his furnace, a small oven heated up excessively with the help of crude skin bellows (indeed the word 'smith' is in Hebrew a 'blower'). In refining the silversmith would fill his cauldron with the silver ore and apply as much heat as he could bear himself, for he was never far from it. In this way he produced the boiling substance which would gradually separate the impurities from the silver he was wanting to work. As this happened the dross would rise to the surface in the form of lead oxide and the silver would settle on the bottom. Then at a certain temperature the lead oxide becomes translucent and if the refiner is sitting over his cauldron (hardly the coolest place to be), he will then see his face mirrored in the pure metal at the bottom of the vessel. Am I being impossibly sentimental in likening this to the Lord looking down into the cauldron of human suffering and watching over us in our afflictions, in which he too is afflicted, until the moment when he can see himself reflected in us?

Here then are two graphic pictures – both of hardship, of pummelling to cleanse and of boiling to refine – which Malachi uses. And they are of course by no accident indications of how God intends to purify the sons of Levi. His ways are far from painless. Indeed pain may be the one necessary ingredient for the purification to be successful. The pain of a serious illness, the sweltering heat of a mental or psychological handicap, the battering of constant disappointment: all these are God's means of grace, often unwelcome to us who bear them but impossible to avoid if we who are the sons and daughters of Levi are to be made into the sort of ministers he wants us to be. Then and only then will, they 'present right offerings to the Lord' (Mal. 3:3). That will be the day!

A glance back to the opening chapter of Malachi will remind us what the wrong offerings were like: shoddy, damaged goods that are not fit to be given to anyone, least of all to the Lord above. The Levitical requirement was of a lamb without blemish and without spot, and God's offering for the sins of the world was of that quality too, as I hardly need to remind you. Right offerings. Offerings that reflect righteousness in the hearts and lives of those who give them, not the middling standards we have allowed ourselves to descend to. Gifts that are costly, not flashy, and worship that is worthy, and not just hearty.

Finally, in a moment of (I suspect) exasperation, Malachi bursts out with the truism 'I the Lord do not change' followed by the rather lame 'therefore you sons of Jacob are not consumed' (Mal. 3:6). Note that the words are directed not to Levi, but to the sons of Jacob, i.e. to the whole people of God. Why are they not 'consumed'? The word in Hebrew means to cease, to come to an end, and that makes better sense, as the NEB recognises. 'For I the Lord do not change, and you do not cease to be sons of Jacob'. Your forefather was a deceiver and you still bear the family likeness. Jacob means a heel, and you are heels like your ancestor. You do not change, just as I the Lord do not change. So, 'Return to me and I will return to you' (Mal. 3:7). But how? Then comes the word-play.

Jacob has three letters in it, *ayin, qoph, beth*. Transpose them to *qoph, beth, ayin* and you have the word translated 'to rob'. Will a man rob God? Will he do the Jacob on God? Yet you are doing precisely that, in withholding your tithes and offerings, the very things which will enable the Levites to do their work and concentrate on the work and worship of God. It is not just that you are under obligation to pay your dues because God has said so in the law of Moses. This is for the health and life and well-being of the people of God. So please, I beg you, rob no more, but bring all the tithes into the storehouse and put me to the test, if I will not pour out upon you an overflowing blessing.

There is no word in Hebrew that can be translated 'overflowing', certainly no word that would be suitable here. Instead Malachi makes up a compactum of three short Hebrew words which the English translation renders 'overflowing'. First comes 'ad, until; then comes *beli*, none; and then comes *day*, which can mean either sufficiency or need. Until there is no need: *ad-beli-day*.

What a day it will be when our people give in such measure that our churches can say 'we have no needs'. And what an even better day it will be when God's covenant with Levi really works, and we are purified to offer right offerings and

worthy worship to the One who is all holy, all righteous, and who says to us, as Malachi said to Israel in his opening sentence, 'I have loved you, says the Lord'.

This exposition was given at the meeting of the General Synod of the Church of England in York in July 1995.

The Rt Revd John B. Taylor is an Honorary Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Ely and was Bishop of St Albans from 1980 to 1995.