

PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE
2nd FEBRUARY 2018 – BRISTOL CATHEDRAL

SERMON

Malachi 3:1-5

Hebrews 2:14-end

Luke 2:22-40

One of the unintended consequences of my ordination was that, unfortunately, I ended up having to give up my main hobby, which was choral singing. For over twenty years every Thursday night had been practice night – not always with the same choir, but weirdly always the same evening! But life as a busy minister proved not to be compatible with only being allowed to miss two rehearsals a term, so nowadays I content myself with being a Patron instead of a singing member of my choir.

One of the final concerts in which I sang was a performance of Handel's Messiah. I guess there are quite a few of you here who know that work pretty well? For those who don't, it's the oratorio which contains the Hallelujah chorus, which you probably have heard of. Well, I'm also guessing that most of the Messiah aficionados here will have pricked up their ears at tonight's Old Testament reading.

It's the text for the alto solo "But who may abide the day of his coming" and then the mighty chorus "And he shall purify".

Although Messiah was written in the 18th-century, in the great Victorian-influenced tradition of English choral society singing, "And he shall purify" tends to come across as rather a tub-thumping, welly-boot-stomping piece. And if you sing it like that, it tends to put across a rather Victorian sense of purification – the kind involving a lot of carbolic soap and a scrubbing brush.

But it was during our choir rehearsals some years ago that I literally had something of a revelation about this passage from Malachi. We had a new conductor who was really putting us through our paces. So, when we rehearsed "And he shall purify", he started off by telling us that he wanted us to sing it as smoothly and gently as possible. And when we did that – especially when the whole choir came in part by part - something rather different happened.

It suddenly occurred to me that this chorus is actually a musical representation of purification in the Old Testament sense. It's far more fluid and swirling, like curls of smoke slowly rising through the air, creating a pleasing odour for God.

If you go right back to Noah, once the flood has subsided and everyone is able to leave the ark, what does he do? He builds an altar and offers burnt-offerings of every clean animal and bird on it. “And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind...’”. (Genesis 8:21)

So creating a pleasing odour from the burning meat was a large part of the significance of the animal sacrifices. For the ancient Israelites, the smoke rising came to symbolise their prayers rising up to God – in the same way that incense does in the Cathedral this evening.

But the other significance about the animal sacrifices was that they were an indication of God’s mercy for humankind. God had sanctioned that, instead of offering yourself to him as a physical sacrifice, you could offer an animal, or some birds, or some grain instead, proportionate to what you could afford. The wealthier you were, the larger the animal you had to give up, but if you were very poor, the offering you were required to make was very small.

So, going back to Malachi, who were the ‘descendants of Levi’? Levi was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, way back in the days before the Exodus. And two of his descendants were Moses and his brother Aaron.

When the Israelites eventually reached the Promised Land, the territory was divided up between eleven of the twelve tribes, but not the Levites. They had been specially designated to be the Temple stewards, and of them, Aaron's direct descendants were to be the priests. The Levites were to own no land of their own and were not to labour for their livelihoods like the rest. Instead, they were provided for by being allowed to keep a share of the food and drink resulting from the offerings at the Temple. I use the term Temple loosely here, because to start with, they worshipped in a Tabernacle – a large tent – and it was only in the time of Solomon that the Temple was built in Jerusalem.

There were five types of offering, all codified in the book of Leviticus, and – strange as it might seem to us – they were not all to do with sin. Some were voluntary acts of worship for praise and thanksgiving; some were to make amends to other people, and so on. Yes, some were also to obtain forgiveness for sin, but we get the wrong impression if we think that's all they were about.

Tracing the evidence about sacrifices and offerings through the Old Testament, it appears that over time they started to become rather self-serving instead of God-serving. People forgot the reason for having the rituals.

Instead, they became absorbed in the spectacle of the sacrifices, and apparently even more absorbed in how good they looked depending on the extravagance of the offering they brought. But then they went home and behaved just as badly as ever before. And God condemned them. Look at Isaiah chapter 1:11-16 or Jeremiah chapter 6:20 and you can see that God tells them that it is no good making pleasing odours for him if – to put it bluntly – they stink inside.

So, let's move on to our Gospel reading from Luke, and today's commemoration of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. And what is going on here is the purification of Mary. This ceremony takes place when Jesus is 40 days old, following the law laid out in Leviticus 12, and is all to do with allowing his mother to be regarded as ritually clean following the birth. And Mary has to take two offerings – in her case, two birds because she is very poor. One is for a burnt-offering, as an act of worship, thanksgiving, praise and self-commitment to God. The other is for a sin-offering, to put right an unintentional sin – not having the baby as such, but the bleeding which followed.

The descendants of Levi are still manning the Temple, of course. But by this time one of their activities is selling the items to be sacrificed on the door. Mary would have paid them for the two turtledoves and they would have made a good profit on them.

The very Levites who were supposed to rely entirely on their share of the offerings as set out in Leviticus have by now contorted the law to make money out of everyone else. And – fast-forward thirty years – that is exactly what Jesus is condemning when he overturns the tables in the Temple. The Levites may be creating a pleasing odour to the Lord with the sacrifices, but there is an inward stench of corruption as they line their own pockets.

So what about us, two thousand years on and thankfully far removed from sacrificing animals in church? All those rituals may seem to belong to an ancient world, but we still prize outward appearance in the same way that they did. And cleanliness may be next to Godliness, as the Victorians taught us, but as a society we are still capable of producing an inward stench. The news headlines are constantly making us aware of the levels of corruption and immorality which seem to be endemic in all walks of life – in finance, sport, politics, showbusiness and the rest. We are always quick to condemn - especially when we discover that our own livelihoods are in jeopardy as a result. It's easy to point the finger at people in positions of power or with plenty of money. But on a smaller scale, who of us can really say we have always been scrupulously fair, honest or well-behaved?

As Jesus taught us, we need constantly to remove the specks in our own eyes even as we point out the logs in others'. (Matthew 7:3)

We may not make animal sacrifices to God any more – but in our communion liturgy we pledge to “offer our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). And we therefore have to remember that what God smells is our inward odour. There is no point living an apparently fragrant life on the outside, putting up a façade for other people to see, if inside we are giving off a stench through the attitudes we really have. God will smell straight through it, I’m afraid.

In Ephesians 5:2, we are told:

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

In giving himself up to death on the cross, Jesus becomes the ultimate sin-offering, destroyed in the flesh in order to create a pleasing odour for God, sufficient to purify the corrupt descendants of Levi, sufficient even for God to set aside all our wrongdoing too. The challenge for us is to imitate Jesus by concentrating on the inward odour we give off to God. And if we are truly orientated towards producing a pleasing fragrance for him, our outward appearance will become more Christ-like towards other people as well.